

MIKE SHAYNE

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SHADOW OF FEAR

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by BRETT HALLIDAY

ASSIGNMENT — MURDER

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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1972
VOL. 30 NO. 2

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

NEW MIKE SHAYNE ADVENTURE

SHADOW OF FEAR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

"I want the man called Rafel," the New York gang king said, "I want him now, Mike Shayne. I will see you, with him, before morning. If not, that girl upstairs—" He laughed evilly and Shayne knew only too well what he meant. This man played for keeps 2 to 49

AN EXCITING ESPIONAGE THRILLER

ASSIGNMENT — MURDER

by F. W. NASH

The nights are lonely, the road is dark and there is no turning back. For Death waits at the end of each blind crossing when you're trying to track down the most dangerous prey that ever walked the Earth—a thing called Man! 62 to 99

FIVE NEW SHORT STORIES

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SHADOW OF FEAR

*"Now, Mike Shayne," the gang lord said.
"Bring the man Rafael to me now. If you
don't, that girls upstairs—" He laughed evilly.*

by BRETT HALLIDAY



LUCY HAMILTON wrinkled her nose, brushed a kiss across the cheek of her friend, Cindy Lane, and then kissed Michael Shayne flush on the mouth.

"Whee!," she said, stepping back. "An entire week in Los Angeles. I still can't believe I'm finally going."

"You won't be if you don't hustle, Angel," Shayne laughed. "Your plane is about to take off."

Lucy Hamilton moved away

from them on quick steps, a lithe girl of great animation. She threw one last look over her shoulder, lifted a hand and wiggled fingers, and then she moved out.

The Miami private detective grinned after his secretary. She had been talking about this trip for almost a year now. He didn't even profess to begin to know why shopping in Los Angeles was any different than shopping in Miami or along the Beach. But Lucy Hamilton was very female,

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



and female reasoning ran in different channels than male thinking. Of that, the redhead was sure.

Lucy boarded the plane. Twelve minutes later the huge jet zoomed into the warm night sky and Shayne took the elbow of Cindy Lane. They turned back through the terminal.

"Lucy is so excited she's almost out of her tree," said Cindy.

"Amen," grinned Shayne.

He was at ease, but his gray eyes automatically were busy as they walked. He took in the terminal, categorized and placed people and inanimate fixtures. It was his habit of long standing. He was a curious observer by nature and by profession.

Too, a man never knew when he might bump into an old friend—say, a fingersmith, a purse snatcher, or a hardnosed strong-armed with a long memory and a short fuse.

"It was nice of you to give her a vacation, Mike," Cindy said.

"She more than has it coming to her."

"It's the break that counts, getting out of the rut, exploring new shops, new—"

"Hey!" Shayne interrupted with another laugh. "I don't need excuses."

Cindy Lane winked at him as they reached his topdown convertible. He put her in the

front seat. She was a brunette, engagingly constructed in body and thought-provokingly curved in leg. She had dark sad eyes, and those eyes had been very sad recently. Her husband had been killed in an automobile accident.

Lucy Hamilton had plunged to the rescue. Lucy had slowly, over long months, brought Cindy Lane out of the deep depression. Cindy's life abruptly had been made a shambles with the grinding crash of a car going in under a semitruck, but with Lucy's guidance and gentle encouragement the dark-haired girl finally had become a whole woman again.

The detective braked the convertible at a curbing outside a pink apartment building and made a move to leave the seat. But Cindy put a restraining hand on his arm and smiled.

"You don't have to go up with me, Mike." She squeezed his arm. "And thanks for taking me along tonight. Sometimes I feel like I'm a third thumb with you and Lucy."

"Beat it," Shayne growled with a one-sided grin. "I'm losing sleep."

He watched Cindy cross the sidewalk and enter the building. She disappeared with a flash of calves. When she was out of sight, he twisted suddenly in the seat and looked down the street behind him. A sedan had braked

down there. Headlights had gone out. And now two men were moving leisurely across the sidewalk. They entered another apartment building.

Mike Shayne sat twisted for several seconds and stared. All the way in from the air terminal he had had the odd sensation that he and Cindy were being followed. On the other hand, there was no concrete reason to believe they had been. He was not working on a case at present, didn't even have a prospective client.

He had not been able to keep one set of headlights in his rear view mirror. Various sets had turned off at various intersections. No one set had become glued to them. Still—the feeling persisted.

Shayne grunted and moved out in the convertible, keeping one eye on the mirror. No one ran across the sidewalk behind him to plunge into a sedan again. The sedan remained parked at the curbing, its headlights were dark.

Shayne used his right thumb and forefinger to tug at his left ear and wrote off the shadowing bit to super-active imagination. He put the thought out of his skull and drove to his apartment in a holiday frame of mind. An easy, lazy week was ahead. He planned to begin it with about sixteen straight hours of sleep.



II

MIKE SHAYNE was asleep one minute and wide awake in the next. But he didn't wiggle with the awakening. He lay like a felled park statue. He became aware of breathing. It wasn't his breathing. His was even, had a rhythm. He kept it that way. The breathing he heard had a light wheeze to it, came and went in the choppy takes of lungs battling emphysema. Shayne also was acutely aware of imminent mayhem and he didn't like the sensation for many reasons.

For one thing, it meant he had been pulled out of deep, needed slumber. For another, he was being accosted by an intruder in his apartment at an early hour of the late July morning. But most important, there was something very cold and very final about the gun

muzzle that had been placed against the nape of his neck.

Shayne opened one eye without stirring in the bed. He was belly down, sprawled comfortably, arms and legs spread wide, a single sheet between the skin of his large body and the conditioned air, his red head jammed into two pillows. The hump of a pillow blocked his view and he was unable to see the luminous hands and figures of the clock.

"Okay, Tootsie, you're awake," grveled the man who stood over him.

"For real?" growled Shayne.

"Up. A man wants to see you," said Gravel Voice.

Shayne lifted his head slowly. The gun muzzle remained against his neck. He eyed the clock. It was two twenty-three in the morning. He turned his head to squint up through the heavy shadows of the room. Gravel Voice stepped back from the bed. He was a short, wide black bulk, his facial features obscured by the darkness. He smelled of pomade.

Shayne wrinkled his nose against the odor and sat up. The man wasn't going to kill him. Not at the moment anyway. He was muscle, but he also was a delivery boy. He was to take Mike Shayne to someone.

Shayne snarled, "Vamoose, funny man."

Gravel Voice kept his cool. He had brains too. He didn't move. He merely wiggled the gun in his hand and grunted while Shayne wanted him to come into him, maybe attempt to jam the gun into his eye.

Shayne needed the heavy up close, where he could sweep the gun aside and loop a fist against his jaw in a single move. But the short, wide man wasn't tempted. He remained his distance.

Cool and brainy. That made him a pro, and dangerous.

Shayne slowly edged off the bed and stood. He towered over Gravel Voice as he hitched at pajama bottoms.

"Pal, I've got regular office hours," he said, seeking time, a misplay on the snatcher's part.

"Not this morning you ain't," said the man. "You wanna put on pants or you wanna go like you are? There's a lady downstairs in the car."

"May I turn on the light?"

The man shrugged.

Shayne snapped on a lamp. He had a repertory of names and faces, both good guys and bad guys. Gravel Voice definitely was a bad guy. He also was a stranger, an out-of-towner, or someone new on the Miami down-under scene. Shayne immediately discounted the newness. The gunsling was pushing forty. He was well-groomed and looked athletic. He could have been a school

administrator, a lawyer, or an embalmer. He would be passed in a crowd, he was at ease, and he kept distance between Shayne and the gun. In a nut, he had savvy.

"Where are you from, pal?" Shayne asked conversationally as he stepped into his shorts and bell bottoms.

"It makes a diff?"

Shayne's eyes moved across the framed photograph of Lucy Hamilton on his bureau and he suddenly recalled the sensation he had experienced as he and Cindy Lane had wheeled in from the air terminal. Had intuition been talking to him again? Had he not listened?

He opened a bureau drawer and shoved a hand inside. The man was swift. He slid behind and around the detective, rammed the gun against Shayne's spine and slammed the drawer on Shayne's wrist.

Shayne winced inside but stood without moving. Finally he snarled, "I wear T-shirts, pal."

Gravel Voice allowed him to take a T-shirt from the drawer.

"And socks."

Gravel Voice nodded.

"Do you think I'd try to pull a rod on a sharpie like you?"

Gravel Voice chuckled.

"All I'm going to do is bend your bones out of shape when I get the chance."

Shayne slid his feet into

loafers as Gravel Voice chuckled again. "It'll be the day, Tootsie."

Mike Shayne put on a fresh, flowered shirt. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

"Who wants me?"

"You'll see."

"Will I need a gun?"

"Fun-eee."

Shayne lifted big knobby hands and sighed. "Okay, pal. Take me to your leader."

Shayne moved out. He crossed the bedroom ahead of the dedicated gee. He walked with long strides. He might have been a hungry man with a hangover, a guy who knows that, salvation and new life are just downstairs and across the street where bacon and eggs and black coffee are served by a dainty blonde with a saucy manner and white teeth. He wasn't. He was a guy looking for an inch.

He went through the doorway with his long arms swinging loosely. Without glancing over his shoulder, he knew Gravel Voice had moved in behind him, was coming fast. The gunsels undoubtedly had been given the word: "Once Shayne is moving, don't let him out of your sight."

The lamp was on the table just to Shayne's right on the living room side of the doorway. He caught the base and snapped the lamp behind his back and against the gunsels' wrist.

The guy shouted as Shayne spun off to his right, attempting to get out of line of the gun muzzle. Shayne came on around and shot a pile-driving left straight out from his shoulder. The only trouble was Gravel Voice had rolled with the blow of the lamp and was out of range.

A paroxysm went through the man as he brought the gun up, the muzzle on line with Shayne's chest. The redhead lunged. If he was to die, it was to be in attack. But all the gunsel did was make a quick move to his left and go down low.

Shayne went past him off-balance. Gravel Voice shoved a foot between Shayne's feet and kicked. The detective sprawled.

Then the gunsel was on him. He leaped on Shayne's back, knees driving into the detective's shoulders and mashing his face deeper into the carpeting. A hand caught Shayne's red hair and yanked back his head. The gun muzzle suddenly was jammed against his ear.

"Last time around for choice, shamus," wheezed the man.

Odds were odds. The detective didn't flick a muscle.

III

DOWNSTAIRS, Mike Shayne was ushered into the front seat of a shiny new Buick Electra that

had all of the smells of being a lease car. The gunsel got into the back seat.

"Roll, Jennie," he rasped.

"So point me," said the woman who sat beside Shayne and behind the steering wheel. The Electra motor came to life and purred.

The woman wore a white pantsuit, and she was long and narrow in body and face. In the dashlight, she had eyes that glowed like hot embers and the antagonistic manner of a jilted lioness. Ringless fingers, with nails that looked like daggers, worked against the steering wheel. She ignored Shayne and looked over her shoulder into the back seat.

"As long as we seem to be playing games this morning," risked Shayne, "allow me to play Chamber of Commerce. If you will tell me, Miss, just where the devil we are going I'll—"

He cut off the words as Gravel Voice tapped the back of his skull with the gun muzzle and gave directions. They flowed across to Miami Beach, moved smoothly down the canyon of hotels, motels and glittering business establishments.

Shayne noted on a bank clock that the temperature was 77 degrees. Not too bad for late July and near three o'clock in the morning. Outside the Buick, the air had to be humid and



WILL GENTRY

salt-tanged. Inside, the air conditioner kept things comfortable. Shayne settled lower in the seat. He could attempt another break, of course. He could reach out, whip the steering wheel and bail out of the Buick, take a chance on Gravel Voice not being too accurate with the gun during the confusion. On the other hand, his curiosity had been aroused—and, besides, he was in Peter Painter territory now.

Peter Painter, chief of detectives in the Miami Beach police department, was not his favorite person, or vice versa. Peter Painter could get nasty about why Mike Shayne had picked Miami Beach to dump a couple of hotshot out-of-town Bad

Elements when Shayne had all of Miami to dump in, Miami being Will Gentry territory and Will Gentry being a longtime friend of Mike Shayne's and police chief in the golden city.

When they turned east across the peninsula the Electra picked up speed. The woman driver seemed to recognize the area now. She used a private bridge over an inland waterway and then Shayne was examining the stone wall of an island estate. The headlights picked up the open gates in the wall and the Buick was slowed as they moved up a long horseshoe driveway.

The woman braked the car behind an LTD at wide stone steps outside what Shayne knew had to be a palatial chunk of stone and glass. In daylight the house would be a pretentious place with green things profusely planted all around. Now it was a high and wide block of masonry, lighted up as if for a homecoming. Light seemed to come from every window.

Gravel Voice tapped Shayne's skull again. "Out, Tootsie."

The woman walked ahead of Shayne, continuing to ignore him. The gunsel remained behind and slightly to Shayne's left. Shayne concentrated on the woman. Her carriage was straight, she walked with short quick steps, and there almost was a coltishness about her. He

thought her attractive in a leggy sort of way.

The woman entered the mansion and left the door open for Shayne. She didn't look back. He followed her into a plush living room. Purple tapestry and huge paintings graced the walls, the pale gray carpeting was thick and the furnishings had cost someone a shipload of money.

A dapper man sat quietly in a winged chair opposite Shayne. He looked expensive. He wore a brown bush mustache and an immaculate brown checked suit. His hair, sprinkled with white, had been coiffed in an expert's shop. He was slight, perhaps fifty years of age, and looked freshly shaved and manicured.

"Mr. Shayne?" he said, measuring the detective from dark, steady eyes.

"Yes, pal?"

"I'm Vincent Logetti."

Shayne scowled, his angular features dark as he attempted to mask surprised recognition.

"New York," said the dapper man. "We've never met."

The woman went to Vincent Logetti, bent and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"Any problems?" he asked.

"Strawberries and cream," she said. She smiled and put a hand on the back of the man's neck, massaged him gently with the ringless fingers.

"She's wrong," said Shayne.

Vincent Logetti lifted one eyebrow and for the first time the woman seemed to realize Shayne existed. She looked mildly surprised as she stared at him from china blue eyes.

"One problem," said Shayne. "Mine, perhaps, but a problem I'm losing sleep because of your ape gunsel, Mr. Logetti."

The tough snarled behind Shayne and the redhead almost smiled as he turned. He knew Gravel Voice finally had blown his cool, and was moving in. Shayne lashed out with a long looping blow and smashed the butt of his palm against the man's Adam's apple.

Gravel Voice staggered back, his hands suddenly pawing his throat and his face screwed up in pain. Shayne followed through and kicked the feet out from under the man. Gravel Voice went down hard on his buttocks. Shayne smashed a fist against his ear and sent the man rolling. Then he was on the gunsel swiftly, straddling him as he clamped both hands on the man's shirt front and lifted him.

"Didn't I tell you, Sonny," he rasped, "I'd bent your hyoid out of shape?"

"That's enough!" Vincent Logetti said coldly.

Shayne dropped the writhing man and snapped around. His eyes were flint-hard now and his

hands worked reflexively, became large fists, opened, made fists again.

"I've had enough of the fun and games, Logetti," he said harshly.

"We all have," nodded the dapper man. "But I must admit, you do live dangerously, Mr. Shayne."

"Merely logically, pal. You had me brought here. That means you want me for something. So, for the moment, nobody leans on me—and that includes your ape."

Logetti looked up at the woman. "Take Alex upstairs, Jennifer," he said. "Mr. Shayne and I have business to discuss."

She was on the edge of protest, but she managed to clamp her lips. And in that same instant, if her eyes could have killed, Shayne figured he would have died seven deaths. She whipped past him and coaxed Alex to his feet. Then she wrapped an arm around Alex's waist and they staggered together out of sight.

Vincent Logetti asked, "Have you calmed, Mr. Shayne?"

"Not much."

"Perhaps a drink will help."

"Cognac—with an icewater chaser."

Logetti left the chair, and went into a small area off the vast living room. Shayne trailed him, watched him work behind

the black-cushioned bar. Logetti put ice cubes in a glass, drew tap water. He poured cognac into a wine glass, then mixed a short Scotch and water.

Shayne took the cognac and icewater back into the living room, exploring everything with his eyes. He crossed to closed French doors, looked through the thin curtains. A stone patio outside was lighted. He grunted, turned, stood slightly spread-legged.

Logetti looked comfortable in the wing chair again, knees crossed. A tiny smile flickered at the corners of his lips.

"You recognized my name," he said. He made it a flat statement.

"Did I?"

"It was in your eyes."

Shayne remained a solid statue. Vincent Logetti was strictly New York, an Easterner, a crime czar. Vincent Logetti was one of New York City's five biggest live mobsters—a Family man, as the aphorism goes, a kingpin in the rackets. It was said that Vincent Logetti was one of the few Aces of the old days who still had the power and the savvy to cut down the challenge of the modern youth movement.

It was said that Vincent Logetti had a black heart and bloodless veins. It was said that Vincent Logetti's idea of fun was watching some croaker; or some

kid hood with takeover ideas scrambling his brains, get his eyeballs plucked out.

It was also said that Vincent Logetti seldom ventured from familiar environs, that he had maintained his stature by keeping his criminal beak to the home grindstone.

So what was a homebody mobhead doing in Miami?

Logetti continued to smile. He picked at imaginary dust flecks on his trouser leg.

"Unfortunately, over the years," he said, "I have acquired a reputation, Mr. Shayne. Not all of it fair acquisition, however."

"One man's opinion," grunted the detective. He sipped the cognac, followed with the water. Then he said, "Look, Logetti, how about if we quit horsing? You're a big man in the New York mob. What the hell do you want with me?"

Logetti went dead for a moment. His black eyes became slits and a flush appeared high on his cheekbones. But he managed to control himself beautifully, Shayne thought. Logetti sipped the Scotch drink, fingered the nonexistent dust flecks on his trousers, and finally looked Shayne square in the eye.

"You're all they said you'd be, Shayne. You're gutty. And you're honest. Damned if I don't think you're one of the most honest bastards I've run into in a

long time. You don't leave any doubt about where you stand. Or why."

Shayne finished the cognac and put the two glasses side by side on a table. "I'm cutting out, Logetti. I'm losing a lot of sleep."

"You aren't going anywhere," the hood said. "Alex isn't far away, and Alex would like to have your heart for breakfast. There are others too. They're around. You just haven't seen them."

"Okay," Shayne sighed. "So get to the point. How come a New York mobster comes all the way down to Miami just to drag me out of bed at two-thirty in the morning?"

"I have a proposition for you."

"And I have an office, pal. With a couple of desks and a couple of telephones. I even have a secretary who is very adept at answering one of the telephones and making appointments for me."

Logetti got out a thin wallet, took two fresh five hundred dollar bills from the wallet and placed them on a table beside the wing chair.

"I want to see Rafel. Personally. I want to talk to him, face to face. The thou is for you to set up the meet. I'm told, and by the most reliable sources, that you are one of possibly four or



whisper, a mythical warrior off practicing invasions in the Everglades, a hypothetical giant, some called a militant—with red-blooded patriotism pounding through his arteries and a fierce cause driving him to unrealistic ends, a champion of democratic-thinking people who was more fictional than real—except to the CIA and perhaps one or two other Washington agencies, of course.

"I have one thousand new M-16 rifles for sale," Logetti went on. "And I also happen to be in the casket business. I own a company. We make caskets. Someone has to, you know." He paused and smiled. It was a cobra's smile. "I can ship the caskets to Miami. I have an outlet, a funeral home. It should not be difficult for your friend to make purchases at the funeral home, providing we can reach an agreement on price. That's why I have to see him. We must discuss the price on a personal basis."

"Logetti, you're nuts. I couldn't produce Rafel if he were my brother."

"Try."

Shayne shook his head. "No dice."

The dapper man sighed and looked down for a moment. Then he faced the French doors and said quietly, "Jack?"

The man who entered the room from the patio was large

five men in all of Miami and the Beach area who can bring Rafel to me or take me to him. I don't care which way it happens—as long as it happens."

Shayne stood immobilized. Rafel. The Mystery Man. Someday Rafel again was to lead his Alpha 66 storm troops on an attempted invasion of Castro's Cuba. But today, to the masses, Rafel did not exist. He was a

and muscular in a ruffled pink shirt and blue flared trousers. A gold disk on a gold chain was plastered against his barrel chest. He had windblown, corn-colored hair, a tic in his left eyelid, drooping lower lip, and he minced when he walked. But Shayne wasn't hoodwinked. The guy exuded a savagery that was more often found in wild animals.

"Bring the girl downstairs, Jack," Logetti said.

A creepy feeling flashed alive inside Shayne. He watched the large man mince out of sight, then he blinked to Logetti. "Pal—"

Logetti held up a hand, halting Shayne's words. "Relax and no one gets hurt."

They brought Cindy Lane downstairs and into the expansive room. Pink Shirt and Alex flanked her, Alex wearing a smirk. Behind them stood the woman Jennifer and another man, a squat hairy man with his head set crooked on a lumpy neck. Cindy wore light blue pajamas and silver slippers, a dark blue robe belted tightly at her slender waist. She looked tousled, tormented and frightened.

"Mike—"

She let it hang and Shayne felt his heart go out to her. He had the feeling she wanted to run to him, be held, comforted, told

this was all a bad dream. The anger inside him churned like a bubbling volcano. Any second he was to erupt.

From behind him, Logetti said in a smooth voice, "A man who does not believe in insurance, Shayne, is a fool. However, I assure you Jack and Freddy have been gentle with her—so far."

Shayne stared straight into Cindy's eyes. "You okay?"

She nodded without a sound and the detective knew a fraction of relief.

"I repeat," Logetti said. "So far."

Shayne whirled.

Logetti was deadpan, still sat in the chair with his knees crossed and his fingers flicking the imaginary dust particles. But his black eyes were flat and narrow now and the bush mustache seemed almost to bristle.

"I want the meet with Rafel," he said.

"Or?" Shayne snarled.

Logetti's shrug was slight. The cold eyes did not leave the detective's. "Or we fill your Miss Lane with nare," he said. "Jennifer is a registered nurse, an expert with the needle, so we won't kill Miss Lane, merely make her a walking skeleton. Your choice, Mr. Shayne."

"You're dead, Logetti!"

The hood, unperturbed, went

on: "We're going to take her to sea. Does she have sea legs? I hope so. Because she's going to spend a day or two or three—or however long it takes you to find Rafel—aboard ship. I tell you this in case you are harboring ideas about storming this place along with a man named Will Gentry, who I understand is your friend, and the top cop in Miami."

IV

MIKE SHAYNE was let out of the Buick Electra on a deserted street corner near his apartment. Alex, still chuckling, drove away. Shayne stood huge, immobile and rumbling in the first gray of dawn, his fists working reflexively and his mind churning as the twin taillights of the Electra disappeared.

Emotionally, he could swiftly kill Vincent Logetti and all his henchmen, including the woman Jennifer. Without compunction. Of that, he had no doubt.

Shayne turned and moved slowly along the sidewalk, oblivious of direction or the hot stillness of early morning that pressed in on him. His chances of immediate vendetta were infinitesimal, he knew. But that was rational thinking—and did he want to function rationally now?

He stopped, stared around, then shook himself down and increased the pace of his long

strides. He suddenly was conscious of the city, the quiet, and the swiftly approaching dawn. This was familiar territory. This was home, where he operated the best, where there were few, if any, peers in his field. This was Miami, and he was Michael Shayne, citizen cop, veteran of countless physical, emotional, and mental battles. He had been bruised, bent and twisted in his years, knocked, stomped and shot.

He had lost battles, but he had won wars. He still was breathing.

He turned into the doorway alcove of a health food shop, faced the street and put a shoulder against the corner of a display window. He lit a cigarette and pulled the smoke gratefully into his lungs. An image of Cindy Lane flashed across his mind. Was she already heading out to sea? Who was aboard the craft with her? Alex? Jack The Mod? The meathead Freddy? Nurse Jennifer? Hell, it didn't figure that Vincent Logetti would leave himself totally sans guard in the island mansion.

Shayne took a quick fourth and fifth drag on the cigarette and arced the remainder out into the street. A police patrol car eased up in front of him. There were two uniformed cops in the front seat. The cop on the passenger side frowned on him

for a few seconds and then lifted a hand in recognition. "Mike."

"Ambrose."

"Trouble?"

"Yeah. Insomnia."

"Hell, ain't it?"

The patrol car eased off and Shayne knew a momentary urge to yell after it. Police Chief Will Gentry was a sage man. He, Shayne, could use some sageness at the moment.

But he didn't need Gentry. He needed Rafael. Because Rafael could get him Cindy, and Cindy's well-being was paramount at the moment. He had to get her off that boat, out of the hands of the goons who probably were fiendishly looking forward to shattering her life with a narcotics needle. The needle was their kind of fun and games. Who cared if a nice girl died?

It was fun watching her writhe, watching the fluid muscles of her young body tense and knot with rejection as the bang in the arm or thigh shot the hot horse into her bloodstream. It was fun hearing her scream the protests and then cry and moan against the creeping delirium tremens. It was fun to stand there laughing and joking, and maybe going over to the wall refrigerator to dig out another round of cold beer, while a girl contorted and wrenched against the workings of the Birdie powder.

Shayne slammed a fist against his thigh in frustration. Somehow he had to free Cindy Lane. Then, and only then, could he concentrate on settling a score with Logetti and his ghouls. For the present, he needed Rafael.

Rafel was shrewd. Rafael figured all of the angles. And Rafael would not be taken in by Logetti's shallow tale of wanting to meet a Mystery Man merely to sell rifles.

A kingpin hood did not run around the countryside peddling stolen rifles like he was some kind of door-to-door character. Kingpins had lieutenants, henchmen, brokers, lawyers, salesmen who could get a price for arms. When kingpins moved on their own, kingpins were:

(1) Cutting ties.

(2) On the run.

(3) Or had an ulterior motive.

Shayne left the alcove. Rafael had to be persuaded in spite of any logical misgivings he might have about Logetti's motive. The detective walked swiftly now, pounding on long strides to his apartment building. He went through the building and out into the parking lot. The convertible was gassed, mechanically ready to roll. He used the windshield wipers for a few seconds to clear the dew and then he rolled over to Biscayne Boulevard and headed north.

Traffic was light. Frazzled



party goes weavily closing out a night of frivolity, working night people heading home to fried potatoes and ketchup and a day's sleep, the occasional early morning fisherman aiming for the water, poles sticking out of rear windows. That kind of traffic made it easy to spot a tail. A pair of bright headlights had settled in Shayne's rear view mirror and remained there. He shrugged. So?

The service station he wanted was lit up like the entrance to a fairground at State Fair time. Colored lights blinked, winked and beckoned kaleidescopically, but in the dimness of five o'clock in the morning the station stalls were empty. Shayne vacated the convertible and eyed a battered Chev as it rolled on past the station. The Chev had a lone occupant. If the guy had been a tail, he didn't seem interested now. The Chev clattered on

down Biscayne and out of sight.

Shayne turned to the station. He was getting a three-man rush from attendants. He held up a hand. "All I need is an oil check, boys."

The trio braked noticeably, and then a lean young man who might have been Cuban, Puerto Rican or Mexican detached himself from the others and said, "I'll take it."

He opened the hood and bent over the motor. Shayne allowed the other two attendants a few seconds to move back toward the station proper before he said, "Storm's brewing."

"That right?" said the young man, straightening with the dipstick. He didn't look at the detective. He twisted and looked at the stick in the light. "Oil's okay, sir," he said. He put the stick back into the motor. "How come you figure there's a storm coming?"

"I can smell it in the air. It seems to be hanging over the city."

The young man closed the hood of the convertible and glanced skyward. "Looks okay up there to me, but then one never knows."

"That's right," said Shayne, nodding. "One never does. Take care."

"I'll try."

"This could be a bad storm, matter of life or death."

"If you say," shrugged the attendant, and then he went off to join his fellow attendants.

Shayne drove out of the station and over to Miami Avenue, turned back downtown. The word had been passed to one of Rafel's incognito troops: Something that could be trouble to Rafel was afoot, and right here in the city. And that something was serious—a matter of life or death, literally. He, Shayne, needed to meet with Rafel.

The message had been clear enough, but the answer had left the detective dangling, as he had known it would. The lean young man would attempt to contact Rafel, pass along the word a Miami detective had something hot for the warrior, needed to have a powwow. What Rafel would do with it was anyone's guess.

Shayne returned to his apartment, made a pot of coffee, showered and shaved and put on fresh shorts. He had hours to kill. He was hung until noon, and he was keyed.

Shayne slapped a fist against a palm. There was little doubt in his mind about how all of this had come about. The hoods had rolled into Miami with himself their primary target, and probably Lucy Hamilton the insurance target. They would know about Lucy if they knew about

him. But the trip early in the evening to the air terminal, the departure of Lucy had tossed them a curve. Not much of a curve, of course.

They had reacted cagily, used noggins, put two and two together. A girl had accompanied Shayne and his secretary to the terminal. The hoods had watched. Inside the terminal the two girls had kissed good-by, then Lucy Hamilton had boarded a jet.

Mike Shayne and the other girl had rolled back into the city. They had chatted amiably, grinned and smiled at each other, been at ease. Lucy Hamilton, Mike Shayne and the girl were friends. So it didn't take much figuring to come up with an answer to a problem. The hoods had shifted gears smoothly, eyed a new secondary target and picked up Cindy Lane.

He got up and went to a window, stood staring out on the city. The dawn had totally grayed, was turning pink. He went to the front door, opened it, squatted and stared at the home of the lock in the jamb. The metal was not scratched. Alex had not jimmied the lock. But that was not too surprising. Like almost everything else, locks were cheaply made these days, easy to force with almost any key.

He returned to the window.

He should try to sleep. He had until noon before he could swing into action again. He went into the bedroom, sprawled, stared at the ceiling. If he could get over the private bridge, get onto the island undetected, he would have a chance. Stone walls and iron gates were irritating deterrents, little more. Walls could be scaled and gates, like apartment doors, could be opened.

And even hoods had to sleep. There was that. Logetti, even though holding a trump card, was human, to a degree. He fatigued; he slept. If he could be trapped in bed, like a certain private detective had been trapped, a trick could be turned. Eye for an eye. Logetti for a girl.

Mobsters; even henchmen—Alex, Jack the Mod, Freddie, whoever had remained ashore to play bodyguard—understood that kind of thinking. The key, of course, was to gain entry to the mansion, then quietly subdue the bodyguard and take a prisoner.

But if he failed. . .

Shayne shook his head. No. He had to have the man named Rafel.

The Miami noon sun was a brass color, the breezes were hot, and Shayne was perspiring when he turned from the sidewalk and entered the vast downtown department store. The cosmetic section was on the first floor, off to his left from the door.

He moved with purpose to a glass display counter, totally oblivious to the comfort of the air conditioning. A polished, young sepia-colored girl with glossy, natural black hair piled high on her head moved behind the counter to him. She was alone in her cubicle, a walking display of some of the wares in the glass cases that surrounded her.

The singleness was why Shayne had had to wait until the noon to one o'clock hour. It was the only hour during the working day when the girl was to be alone. Her sales partner was out to lunch.

"May I help you, sir?" the girl said.

"I'm looking for something called *Hidden Torment*. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but my wife—"

"I'm sorry, sir," the girl interrupted, "but we are out of stock at the moment, and I am afraid it will be some time before we get in a new supply."

"Any idea how long?"

"Perhaps not at all. Frankly, it wasn't a very good seller."

Shayne put down the sinking feeling. Rafel was debating. Rafel had been informed a detective needed to see him but Rafel was weighing exposure against need.

"Honey, this could be disastrous," Shayne told the girl.

Her expression remained

bland. "I'm sorry, sir. There isn't anything I can do. You understand."

The detective understood. The girl had delivered what she had been told to deliver. She was not lying. She couldn't do any more for the redhead.

It was beginning to look as if Cindy Lane was in for a very rough time.

V

MIKE SHAYNE drove over to Miami Beach. He was frustrated and worried. Presentiment was on him. For a few seconds, he wished he had strapped on his shoulder rig and gun when he had gone out for his rendezvous with the salesgirl in the department store. But, on the other hand, he went armed only when it seemed absolutely necessary, and conversing with a polished girl at a glass counter in a gleaming downtown store certainly had not called for a weapon.

He banged the steering wheel with a palm and turned the convertible down the peninsula. He eased off the accelerator and cruised. What was to be his next move? Rafael, by design, was playing hard to get.

He turned into a drive-in, braked in the shade of a brilliant red and white striped awning and ordered a plain hamburger and a

glass of iced tea from a leggy girl in spangled hot pants and titian blouse. Ordinarily, he would have appreciated the girl. Today he paid no particular attention to her. He slouched in the seat of the convertible and pulled at his nose.

How was he to make Logetti understand that a detective could not simply go barging into the Everglades and yank an Alpha man out of hiding by the seat of his fatigues?

It was that simple. If Rafael was off practicing war, no one was going to touch him. He was too dedicated to the eventual overthrow of Fidel, too caught up in the needs of his zealous exile followers to heed a summons from the outside world, frantic as that summons might be. War games, Fidel's demise, the return of the exiles to their homeland too precedence over all other things.

Logetti had to understand this.

Shayne finished the hamburger and the iced tea and drove on out to the island mansion. Logetti wasn't stupid. Far from it. He hadn't remained mob kingpin by ramming his skull against brick walls. Somewhere along the line he had learned to recognize and accept those walls, tear them down if he could but also back away from them if they were impregnable.

Vincent Logetti was not a man to use his head as a battering ram; rather, he used what was inside that glob of bone. Long ago he had learned to view, reason—and sometimes accept disappointment. It was why he was on top.

The only trouble was Logetti did not see the unavailability of Rafel as a brick wall. He smiled the cobra's smile, flicked the brush mustache with a fingertip and said, "I don't care where Rafel is, Shayne. Find him. Use persuasion if necessary. I'm sure you have your methods, as I have mine."

Shayne now sincerely wished he had strapped on the gun. "Look, Logetti—"

But Logetti put up a restraining hand. "It's important that I talk to Rafel, shamus! Move! Or the girl gets her first blast tonight!"

Shayne drove away from the mansion in a blind rage. Deep fear for Cindy Lane was on him too. And he felt so helpless he wanted to strike out at something, smash anything solid, a face, a building, a steel beam.

He stopped at the first bar he spotted and ordered a double cognac and icewater chaser. He sat alone in a dim corner booth and he brooded. There had to be an avenue to Rafel, some way to convey the urgency of the situation. Directness would get



across that urgency but there was no straight line to the Alpha leader. A moving target was a difficult target—and Rafel had to be the most difficult man in Shayne's repertory, to hit with a straight shot.

Shayne grunted and left the booth. He had no time for drink now. With drink he was wasting valuable minutes. He walked out of the bar to blink against the heat and the brightness. He would repeat the early morning request. Not at the Biscayne Boulevard service station, of course. That young troop was off station duty now. But there was a bell captain at a hotel on the Beach. And a second message in the same day from the same detective would have to tell Rafel *something*.

The movement in the corner of his eye alerted the detective. He curved in mid-stride while crossing the sidewalk to his

convertible and squared-off on the approaching round man. The round man grinned and held up V'd fingers.

"Peace, Mike." Then the grin disappeared and the round man jerked his head. "Back here."

Shayne went with the police detective to an unmarked official sedan that was braked at the curbing about a quarter of a block down the street. Shayne got into the back seat while the police detective continued walking, moving away from the sedan. Will Gentry, Miami police chief, sat in the front seat of the sedan. He turned on the seat, cocked a knee and looked back on Shayne.

"About an hour ago," Gentry said, "you made a run out to a private island off the Beach. You wheeled in as if you owned the joint, which you don't. There's a New York hood in the house on that island, Mike. Guy named Vincent Logetti. That name makes him just slightly larger than our run-of-the-mill grafter. What's up?"

Shayne countered, "Don't you miss anything, Will?"

"Police departments cooperate in spite of what you hear," Gentry said. "As amazing as it may sound to some people, it's how we function. A New York biggie—destination Miami—leaves town, Miami gets a call. A Miami racketeer—destination New York

—leaves town, New York gets a call. Simple enough?"

"I must be slipping, Will. I didn't happen to notice your man at the gate."

"Men. And they're on this side of the bridge, not at the gate. That bridge leads to just one place. I'm surprised, Mike, you didn't spot someone. There's quite a crowd out there. I've got two men on the job and Peter Painter has three. It's almost a convention."

Shayne used the thumb and forefinger of his right hand to massage the lobe of his left ear. "Painter, too, huh?"

Will Gentry shrugged. "He's the Beach's chief of detectives."

Shayne was mildly disturbed. Peter Painter didn't like him, and he was not particularly fond of Painter. Over the years, they had clashed often, head-on and heatedly. Shayne never had been sure why. The clashing just seemed to be something inborn in each of them.

Will Gentry said, "I'm waiting, Mike. What's with you and Logetti?"

Mike Shayne unloaded. In addition to being up against what seemed a bleak wall, he seldom held out on Will Gentry. They were too good friends, and over the years mutual trust and respect, mutual ideals and goals, mutual understanding had produced too many mutual ends to

be dallied with. Shayne told Gentry everything, right down to the inflection of voice tone, then he sat back and lit a cigarette and asked, "What do you think?"

Gentry scowled. "That rifle bit stinks. It has to be bigger."

"Yeah."

"But the Lane girl is the concern of the moment. And we can't put the Coast Guard to work. We don't have a vessel name or size—we don't even have the kind. It could be anything from a two-masted—"

"Rafel is the key, Will," Shayne interrupted.

"Let me work on him."

"From where?"

"There's a certain bloke who just happens to be in town"

Gentry let it stand and Mike pressed, "Come on, Will."

But Gentry waved him off. "The bloke is Washington, Mike. Leave it there, okay?"

"Will, sometimes you astound me."

"A cop has to astound people once in a while, shamus. Otherwise he wouldn't be worth his salt as a cop."

VI

ANOTHER WAITING period was on him. Mike Shayne grimaced as he drove toward his apartment. He didn't like waiting. Waiting was for the nine-to-fivers, the ho-hum peo-

ple. He needed action. He wanted Cindy Lane back on land, safe in her apartment. He wanted Lucy Hamilton to return from California. He wanted her at her desk in his office. He wanted to smell the faint scent of her perfume, catch the occasional mischievous twinkle in her eye, look on the smooth muscles of the dancer's legs as she moved from desk to file cabinet, file cabinet to desk. He wanted to hear her laughter, her voice. He wanted to watch her sort through the mail, discard efficiently with a practiced eye. In this instant, he wanted to kiss Lucy Hamilton.

Shayne slapped the steering wheel of the convertible and swore under his breath. If Will Gentry didn't produce swiftly, he was going to explode. Gentry had to come up with Rafel fast.

Shayne turned a corner and noticed in his rear view mirror that a station wagon turned behind him. The station wagon was occupied by a lone man.

At the next intersection, Shayne made a left turn. The wagon followed. Shayne picked up speed gradually. The wagon didn't lose an inch. Shayne cut back over to Biscayne Boulevard. The wagon trailed. The detective began to measure the traffic lights expertly. He got his timing down, flashed across the intersections on yellow lights. Finally he

caught a changing light just right, moved halfway across on yellow and finished on the red.

In the rear view mirror, he saw the wagon make an illegal lurch as the driver fed gas, then stand on its nose with traffic moving in from right and left.

Shayne turned a corner, rolled a half block and shot into an alley. At the exit he whipped back toward the boulevard. He was free of the tail. But who had been on him? Will Gentry wouldn't have a man following him. There was no reason. Logetti was a possibility, of course, but Logetti had his club. Cindy.

So, the dude in the wagon almost had to be a Peter Painter man. Like Will Gentry, Painter wanted to know why a private detective had visited an island that was under surveillance. Which, in turn, probably meant Painter also had stakeouts at a detective's apartment and Flagler Street office.

Shayne took a unit at a modest motel. The room walls were a pale orange in color and that didn't help his mood. He hated pale orange coloring. He sat on the edge of a stiff chair and stared darkly at the dead eye of a television set.

He wondered how fast Will Gentry would be able to move, how long it would take Gentry to make his contact with the

Washington man who was in town. A fresh thought struck the detective. Gentry didn't know he had set up temporary headquarters in a motel.

Shayne called Gentry's office. Gentry was out. No one knew where the chief had gone, and no one knew when he might return to headquarters. Shayne left the number where he could be reached. Then he paced, smoking a cigarette and scowling on the orange walls.

He pondered phoning Lucy Hamilton in Los Angeles, but discarded the temptation. Lucy was on vacation. She couldn't help anyway.

He snubbed out the cigarette and lit a fresh one. The image of Timothy Rourke, his longtime and trusted friend at the *Miami Daily News*, crossed his mind and he debated summoning Rourke. The newspaperman would be company, if nothing else. He could unload on Rourke, kill time in a long verbal replay. Rourke would listen patiently, file mentally, and not turn a word on his typewriter until the detective gave the okay. Rourke played ball with his news sources.

Shayne reached for the telephone, then hesitated. Gentry could have made fast contact with the Washington man. Gentry could be lifting his phone at this second to call a detective

in a motel room. It was important to the detective that the line be clear.

Shayne shook himself down and stripped out of his clothing. He showered, using up thirty minutes while keeping an ear cocked for the ring of the telephone. Finally he toweled, put on shorts and dropped a quarter in a radio slot. He lay on the bed and lit a fresh cigarette and stared at the orange ceiling. Will Gentry would call when he had set up the meet with Rafael.

The special weather bulletin on the radio alerted him. A tropical depression had formed in the Atlantic off the Florida east coast. It still was too early to tell if a fullfledged hurricane was brewing, but a squall line had materialized abruptly and small craft were being warned to return to harbor.

Shayne sat up in the bed, his thoughts churning. To carry out what he was thinking required being armed. He grunted, his gray eye narrow. His gun was in his apartment and Peter Painter almost certainly would have that route blocked now. He left the bed, tried Will Gentry's number again. Nothing. His scowl deepened, and then he called the *News* and asked to be connected with Timothy Rourke.

"Mike on this end, Tim."

"What-ho?"

"That old .45 of yours, the



war souvenir. Do you still have it?"

"Speak with reverence, friend. What gives?"

"I need to borrow it."

"Okay."

"Immediately. I can be at your place in—let's make it thirty minutes. What about ammo?"

"I think I've got a few slugs. Mike, what the hell is brewing?"

"A tropical depression, haven't you heard?" The redhead almost grinned.

Timothy Rourke was a tall, lean man with deep-set cynical eyes. He was not easily hoodwinked, especially when it came to Mike Shayne. He could smell his kind of news story, and the smell made his nose twitch slightly but, from experience, he knew he could not pry anything from the detective. Shayne would cut him in at the proper

time. Thus he handed the .45 and the box of ammunition to Shayne were a mere lift of a quizzical eyebrow.

Shayne turned loose what he felt was his first genuine grin of the day. Rourke's silent curiosity always amused him. Shayne unloaded, filled in the newspaperman. There was no reason not too. There would be no screaming headlines until Cindy Lane was safe again, perhaps not even then unless Will Gentry nodded.

"I'd say Will has a shot at making one of the biggest plays of his career," Rourke mused. "If he can hook Logetti cold on a kidnaping count, he'll pull off something the Washington boys have been going after for a good many years."

"But first there's Cindy," Shayne said flatly.

Rourke nodded. "If these cats return to the island."

"The radio warning will bring them in," Shayne said. "They're Sunday sailors and New Yorkers. How many New Yorkers know these waters?"

"A few do," Rourke said.

Shayne accepted the truth with reservation. "Okay, so maybe there's a New Yorker or two who know the keys and coves, Tim. But not these boys. The only thing they're experts at is bloodletting."

"So you figure on plunging

headfirst into a gang of experts, huh?"

The detective grinned again. "I'm no sailor either, pal, Sunday or otherwise, but on land they're in my ball park."

"Take Gentry," Rourke advised. "He has troops."

Shayne shook his head. "Cindy could get hurt during an invasion."

"On the other hand, let's say you're successful," Rourke said. "Let's say you get her out. Logetti and his meatheads aren't going to sit out there on an island waiting for you to return with cops. They'll fly, and that could lose you a valuable friend. That could move Will Gentry over into Peter Painter's camp. Because you know damn well, Mike, Will wants Logetti. It'd be a helluva large feather in his hat—in addition to allowing him the satisfaction of again knowing he has helped rid the world of one more hood."

Shayne balked. "Yeah, granted. But right now I have to weigh Cindy Lane's well-being against friendship—and the girl's the winner."

The lanky reporter looked downcast.

"I wish you hadn't thought of me and my war souvenir," he said.

Shayne tapped the newspaperman's shoulder. "If I thought you meant that, pal, you could

put the heater back in your trunk."

"Get out of here, you big ape," Rourke growled. "Before I start crying."

Shayne turned out of the apartment door and closed it behind him.

"Luck..." Timothy Rourke's single, trailing word brought a faint grin to the detective's face.

VII

MIKE SHAYNE invaded from the sea. For a hundred dollar bill and the excitement of the adventure, Captain Billy Clark maneuvered his small craft, sans running light, into the backside of the island.

"You're the lifeline, Billy," Shayne said as he mounted the railing of the craft.

"Take a couple of days," said the old salt with a shrug. "Me'n the sea, we ain't angry at each other."

Shayne went over the side and into the rolling water. He wore swimming trunks and a lightweight slipover shirt he had purchased at a sports shop on Biscayne. He carried the .45 in his right hand. He was waist deep in water and appreciated the smooth bottom of the Atlantic. He waded toward the island, keeping the gun high.

The night was black, the wind strong; the wind was at his back,

blowing inland. One hundred and twenty-five miles out in the Atlantic a hurricane was shaping. No one was officially calling it a hurricane yet, no one knew its direction, but the storm was there.

Shayne reached a narrow sand beach, moved across it swiftly and crouched against a grassy slope that went up to the lighted mansion. The waiting for darkness, for this moment, had been nerve-wrenching. He had not heard from Will Gentry, and he finally had reached the point he did not want to hear from the police chief. Cindy Lane's safe return became his single goal.

He went up the grassy slope on hands and knees. He had an unobstructed view of the mansion now. The shadow clumps between himself and the house were natural growths, hibiscus and sharp palmettos. He doubted that Logetti had any of his henchmen patrolling the grounds. Logetti would have the bridge entrance under surveillance, but it was unlikely that the hood had even given a second thought to his vulnerable backside. He was a landlubber and he'd think like a landlubber. He wouldn't even consider that he might be attacked from sea.

Shayne moved from hibiscus to palmetto until he was immediately behind the mansion. From his crouched position, he

surveyed lighted windows. No drapes had been pulled on this side of the mansion and he had a clear view of the interior of the rooms. He could not find movement. Immediately ahead was a door. He guessed that it would open into a kitchen or into an area that would lead into a kitchen.

But the door wasn't what he wanted. Cindy had been kept on the second floor. If she again was inside the mansion, it was reasonable to assume that she again was being kept upstairs, probably under guard in one of the bedrooms.

The detective needed a way upstairs. He curled to one side of the house and stared on the patio. There were no trellises to climb to the windows of the second floor. He inventoried the patio, picking out dark blobs of furniture between the rectangles of light that fell from the ground floor windows. Then he eased in behind a row of planted things and moved along on his hands and knees until he was approximately halfway along the patio.

He lifted his head cautiously, moved on a few paces, and looked straight into the vast living room. Behind the thin curtains of the French doors he could see Logetti in the same wing chair he had occupied early that morning. Logetti wore a dressing gown, belted at the

waist. Under the gown was a white shirt and necktie, sharply creased trousers. The guy was a dude, even while at ease with a magazine in his lap. Behind Logetti was Jack the Mod, lapping at a drink. He seemed to be attempting to make conversation with his boss, but Logetti never looked up from the magazine as he idly turned pages.

Where were the others? Shayne waited and watched. He was perspiring now and he felt taut as stretched wire. Logetti and Jack and Mod seemed to be the only occupants of the room. Did it mean Alex, Freddy and the nurse remained out in the Atlantic somewhere with Cindy Lane?

Shayne moved around to the back of the house again, out of sight of anyone who might venture onto the patio. He remained crouched and breathing hard at a palmetto. Reflexively he bounced the .45 in his hand; it was as if he idly was weighing the weapon by feel. He moved to the other side of the mansion, then stopped in mild surprise. What he needed was dead ahead.

The stairway loomed almost as if it was an invitation. It was roofed, its interior black. He squatted for a long time, hit by a sinister thought. Eyeing that dark well, he wondered if either Alex or Freddy might be sitting somewhere in its blackness. The



windows on this side of the mansion were dark, no light on either floor.

Cautiously he moved on around the stairway, remaining out in the yard, circling deep. Then he eased back in under the steps, squatted and tuned his ears. He heard nothing above him. The only sound came from a distance, the slap of the waves down on the tiny beach. An image of Captain Billy Clark, riding anchor off shore, flashed across his mind. Billy would be there a year from now if he did not get returning passengers this night.

Shayne contorted his body and head and put an ear against the back of one of the steps. He heard nothing. If anyone was standing guard on the stairway, the guy was a statue. Shayne decided that he still was

maneuvering inside Logetti's vulnerable area and he moved around to the foot of the steps where he stopped and crouched again.

It was black as a cave all the way up. He felt exposed. Even though the night was dark, that blackness was nothing compared to the inkwell at the top of the stairway. Anyone standing up there could easily see him. And a tiny flame could spit out of that stairwell darkness, end a long career.

He moved up five steps, crouched. Nothing stirred above him. He sucked a breath and went on up, his bare feet silent against the wood steps. The landing at the top of the stairway was small and deserted.

He faced a black door. Shifting the .45 to his left hand, he searched carefully for the knob. His fingers closed on it lightly and he twisted slowly. Surprisingly the knob turned.

He hesitated. An unlocked door when there was a captive inside the mansion? It wasn't kosher. On the other hand, it wouldn't be the first time a hood had fallen on his face because of carelessness.

Shayne turned the knob and cracked the door on deeper darkness. After a few seconds, he inched the door open and stepped quickly inside. He sensed movement before he heard the

hiss of indrawn breath, and he hunched his shoulders to tuck his head, spinning at the same time. The spin was just enough so that his shoulder caught the savage blow. Pain splayed through Shayne's body as the blow sent him on down to one knee. the wall and stood. His knees buckled once, but he pressed into the wall and kept himself up. He searched the wall blindly. Light now would not further endanger him. The detective felt sure his attacker had attempted to handle him alone.

Sucker!

Someone had spotted him out on the grass, had been waiting for him. Someone had conveniently unlocked a door. But that someone was tackling him alone too.

Shayne swept the gun upward in a wild, instinctive blow. It smashed against something solid and he heard a grunt. He had the sensation of a body arching over him and he twisted on his knee to drive a huge fist straight into the middle of where the body should be. The fist collided with a hard midsection, brought another grunt just an instant before something hard and vicious ricocheted off the back of his head.

Shayne went down. He suddenly was groggy but he had not lost his senses. He had the sensation of someone pitching toward him and he rolled. The body spilled across his legs, writhed. He sat up and brought the muzzle of the .45 down hard against a skull. The body jerked, then was quiet.

Shayne kicked his legs free and got to his knees. He found

He found a switch and snapped it on. He was in a large bedroom that was expensively furnished. A canopied bed looked wide and inviting. He went to it, sat on the edge. He put his head down between his spread knees and allowed the blood to run. An egg-size lump had formed on the back of his skull and there was a deep ache in his shoulder where the first blow had landed solidly. He moved his arm in a rotating motion, working the shoulder. Nothing was broken.

Finally he sat up. His head cleared and he inventoried Opposite him, sprawled face down on thick tan carpeting, was the body of a man in a blue and white striped shirt, yellow slacks and Jesus sandals. The man's face was turned away, but the detective recognized Alex.

He went to the body, stood over it. Alex had a slashed and bloodied nose where the gun had ripped the flesh. His eyes were screwed down tight, but he was breathing. Shayne stooped and took the blackjack from Alex' clenched fist. Alex didn't stir.

The detective grunted. Alex required a hell of a lot of convincing. Twice within fifteen hours he had discovered he could not cope with a redhead. Not without help.

Alex mumbled something and Shayne bent and tapped him expertly with the blackjack. He did not kill Alex, nor scramble what brains the dedicated hood had. He merely put Alex to sleep again.

Shayne went to an inside door across the room and snapped out the light. He stood for a long time, allowing his eyes to readjust to the darkness. He ached, but his head was clear. Alex, obviously, had been playing Lone Ranger. Whether Alex had accidentally spotted him down in the yard or had been a guardian of the door was not important.

The import was in the presence of Alex upstairs and Logetti and Jack the Mod downstairs. That left Freddy and the woman and it was unlikely that they alone were at sea with Cindy Lane. The cruise apparently had been cut off by the hurricane warning. Which meant Cindy was in the house. Somewhere.

Shayne inched the door open and put an eye against the crack. He stared on a hallway. Silence hung in the mansion. He put his

head out in the hallway, looked up and down. Nothing.

He stepped out of the room and moved quickly past closed doors down to a corner. He looked around the corner. No one was in sight. Far down the corridor was the head of the stairway. He scowled then and his eyes flashed across the closed doors. Was Cindy behind one of those doors?

He moved on silent bare feet across the carpeting, inching toward the stairway, his eyes and ears tuned. If anyone appeared suddenly at the head of the stairway, he'd shoot.

An open door caught his eye and he stopped in mid-stride, stood frozen. The door was to his left and ahead, the second door back from the stairway. He hefted the blackjack to his left hand and the gun to his right hand, sucked a breath and eased toward the door.

Cindy Lane was sprawled flat on her back on a bed opposite the open door. Her arms were spread wide above her head and her wrists were handcuffed to the head of the bed. She was wide-eyed and unmoving and for a moment Shayne thought he was looking on a drugged victim.

Then Cindy's eyelids closed down. She blinked them open immediately. They were suddenly filled with disbelief, but Shayne knew relief. Cindy had

her senses. She didn't appear to be bombed out of her mind.

Shayne took a step forward, keeping the head of the stairway in the corner of his eye. Cindy didn't move, but her eyes suddenly danced wildly. The detective sensed the warning. He stopped and stared. Cindy kept moving her eyes, looking in every direction but directly at him. Shayne knew. She was telling him she was not alone in the room.

Then Cindy moaned and pulled up her legs and began to twist and turn against the shackle of the handcuffs. The woman, Jennifer, appeared out of nowhere instantly, her back to Shayne as she went to the bed. She bent slightly over Cindy.

"What's with you, cat?" she said in a harsh tone. "Am I going to have to fill you with juice to keep you quiet? Damn, I wish Vinnie would let me. I want to see your eyes pop when that jolt hits you."

Shayne jammed the gun into the waist band of his swim suit and moved swiftly up behind the woman in the green hot pants and white blouse. He slapped a hand across her mouth just before she screamed and yanked her back against his front. He tapped her lightly with the blackjack and she quit struggling immediately. Her head lolled forward and her body sagged.

The detective let her slide down his front to the carpeting.

He winked at Cindy, put a finger across his lips for continued silence, and looked at the handcuffs. He squatted beside the woman. There were no pockets in the hot pants or the blouse. He frowned at Cindy. She had her head up and it bobbed as she gestured for him to cross the room.

He saw the keys on a dresser top. There were two on a small ring, tiny and silver. He returned to the bed and inserted one of the keys in the handcuff lock. Then he heard Cindy suck a long rattling breath, and he knew. But before he could whirl, the voice rasped, "Freeze right there, man."

Shayne did not move a muscle. He remained bent, his fingers on the key head, the key in the cuff lock. His breathing was shallow and harsh and all of his joints seemed locked.

"Turn slow, man," commanded the voice behind him.

The detective straightened and turned, moving by minute degrees. The man who stood in the doorway opposite him was squat and hairy. He had a crooked head set on a lumpy neck.

He also held a very large gun in his hand.

Freddy was angry, alert, and cocked. A lock of hair falling

suddenly to a forehead could trigger him.

Shayne remained a statue.

"Pretty boy..." breathed Freddy. It was all he said.

VIII



MIKE SHAYNE suffered a thorough and expertly administered beating after Alex was revived. Alex was the administrator, and Alex was allowed to work on the detective with knucks and without mercy while Freddy lounged in the doorway with a cold, one-sided grin on his face and a gun in his hand. A flushed Jennifer stood in a corner, flexing her fingers, waiting her turn.

Logetti had come up to the bedroom, then returned downstairs to his magazine. He professed not to like the sight of blood. His single admonition had been, "Don't kill him. He still has to find Rafel for us." And then the mobster had departed.

Shayne lashed out for as long as his limbs would move. But finally he was numb all over and he had no sensation of movement at all. Even the pain disappeared. He was like a wet rag, limp and pliable, bending and becoming indented with each swing of fist and stroke of foot. But he was not allowed to lose consciousness. He knew he was on the carpeting and leaking

blood. He knew Cindy Lane remained shackled to the bed, a wide strip of adhesive tape slapped across her mouth to shut off the screams as she was forced to watch. He also had found out how he had become trapped.

A changing of the guard had been his undoing. Jack the Mod had been sent down to the bridge to relieve Freddy and when Crooked Head had returned to the mansion he had come upstairs to look on Cindy. Crooked Head had taken a fancy to Cindy Lane. Thus far, he had not been allowed to touch but he had been allowed to grin and drool over her.

Finally Shayne was turned over to Jennifer. She was savage and brutal with the pointed toe of a shoe, but she lacked the expertise of Alex and the shoe toe found the detective's ear once too often. He lost consciousness.

He came around slowly. He knew he was breathing, he knew he was stirring, he knew someone hovered over him. But there was a death silence too and, for an

instant, he imagined he had been buried alive. His eyes popped open. Everything swirled and he felt pain and nausea. He writhed against both, groaning, but he doggedly hung on to consciousness.

"Prop him up," a voice commanded.

Shayne recognized Logetti's voice, but he could not get the man in focus. Logetti continued to move in tiny circles, never still. And then hands caught the detective's shoulders and he was yanked up into a sitting position. Nausea washed over him. He retched but he had no sensation of anything coming out. Finally a fist under his jaw snapped his head up and propped it.

Shayne blinked rapidly. Logetti was squatted before him, as clear as if he was bathed in a spotlight. His face was dark and his black eyes were tiny glittering slits.

"You've got until noon tomorrow, Shayne," he growled. "Get me Rafael by noon or—"

He wrapped fingers in the detective's red hair and wrenched the head around until Shayne was staring on the bed. Jennifer was arched over Cindy Lane. Freddy sat on Cindy's legs and seemed to be enjoying himself. But it was the woman who brought the rattle of protest from the detective.

The woman had slid a needle

into Cindy's arm, her thumb had pressed a plunger down, and Cindy had arched her shoulders, her eyes going wide with fear and terror as the jolt hit her.

Shayne attempted to scramble and was knocked into the carpeting again. A foot slammed down on his ear and held him. He sucked air, the breathing stertorous. The foot ground against his ear.

"Tomorrow! Noon!"

And then the foot was gone and Shayne felt a hand in each of his armpits. He was lifted by two men and propped on his feet.

He had no sensation of moving, but he knew he was leaving the bedroom. He was propelled down a carpeted stairway and out the front door of the mansion. Fresh air washed him, helped to clear his head, but he remained powerless against the hands that guided him. He was taken around to the back side of the house and across grass to the beginning of the slope. Then he was freed and shoved.

Shayne could not stop the forward pitch. He went face down, and he had the sensation he was spilling from a cliff edge. But he landed hard and quickly, and then he rolled. When he stopped, he breathed tiny grains of soft sand.

He lay quiet for a long time, Presently he summoned enough presence of mind to roll another

half turn. He flopped on his back, remained spread as he sucked in air. His mind and his eyes cleared and he lay inert, staring up at a sprinkling of stars that occasionally blinked back at him from swiftly-moving, broken clouds.

Sound returned to him and he heard the blowing wind and the slapping of waves against the beach. He knew where he was and he knew why he was there. None of it was tasteful. But the only problem was, he seemed unable to get his muscles working again and he wasn't really sure he wanted to. Somehow being sprawled on the sand, unmoving, was very peaceful.

A black shadow appeared over him, hands shook his shoulders gently, and Captain Billy Clark said, "You-all alive?"

"Good question," the detective managed.

Billy Clark propped him up in a sitting position, braced him. "I was just a-sittin' here, and here you come, rollin' down."

The old salt managed to get the detective on his feet. They staggered together out into the water. Shayne plunged into the water, grimacing against the salt bite in his open wounds. Clark captured him, put him on his feet again.

"For Chris'sake, don't drown on me too, Michael."

Strength surged back into Shayne as they waded out to the anchored vessel. The strong current against his belly and the slap of waves against his chest and face revived him. He went up and over the railing under his own power and then Billy Clark maneuvered him inside the small cabin where he breathed, "Man alive, the last time I seen anyone look that bad was the day my first mate fell overboard and had to wrestle a shark."

Shayne looked in a small mirror. His face was lumpy, darkening in spots, and in a quick count he found five brass knuck splits in his skin.

"Head home, Billy," he growled.

IX

IN HIS APARTMENT Mike Shayne cleansed and doctored the cuts and bruises abstractedly, his mind churning. If Cindy Lane had been in danger before, she was on the brink of living death now. And he had pushed her to that brink. The abortive one-man invasion had been a catastrophic failure.

What had Timothy Rourke advised? "*Take Gentry.*"

He found a bottle of cognac. He drank from the bottle, the icewater chaser never entering his thoughts. He drank again, felt a loose tooth. He tested the tooth.

with his tongue, growled, put the bottle back on a shelf and whirled around. He was like a wound top, taut and straining to be set free. Something had to give.

Rationality struck him. He had erred. A search for vendetta had blinded him. Cindy Lane now was in grave danger because of his stupidity.

Okay, so how was he to offset the stupidity? A beginning was Will Gentry. If Will had contacted Rafel, set up the meet...

He called police headquarters. Gentry wasn't on the premises, hadn't been seen since around noon. He called the Gentry home. Mrs. Gentry had not seen or heard from her husband since he had gone to work that morning. Mrs. Gentry wanted Mike Shayne to come out for a Sunday dinner one of these weeks soon.

Shayne turned from the telephone and stood scowling. And, for no reason, he abruptly remembered there had been an hour during this day when he had been wary of returning to his apartment, wary of attempting to pick up his own gun, wary of going to his office.

He pulled at his ear and looked around. It would not have surprised him to find a Peter Painter man sitting quietly in a chair in a corner, waiting for

him to come to his senses. He found no one and he grunted. Either Painter's boys had missed him at the bridge, Painter wasn't excited about a private detective visiting a large New York mobster on a Florida island, or Painter had tossed in the towel for the moment.

Shayne snorted and went into his bedroom. Painter would catch up with him eventually. He put on a linen suit and a shoulder holster. He put a gun in the holster. He owed Timothy Rourke a war souvenir now. He returned to the front room. Restlessness was creeping up on him again, but there was only one thing to do. Wait for Will Gentry's call. Gentry was Cindy Lane's single salvation.

Midnight came and passed and the detective prowled the apartment. He had checked and re-checked his cuts and lumps six times in a bureau mirror and he was tired of looking on the scowling face of the reflection. Gentry would call. Eventually. Shayne was sure of it. Will Gentry *had* to call. A noon deadline was edging closer.

The phone rang. Shayne swept up the receiver.

"Mike?"

Lucy Hamilton's voice from California sounded plaintive. "Mike... Oh, I'm glad I caught you!"

Shayne was instantly alert.

Lucy Hamilton sounded as if she had run headon into a giant-size problem. "You okay, Angel?" he rasped.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she said quickly. "Only—"

"Only?"

"Well, I didn't realize things were so expensive out here. I mean—"

"Angel?" Shayne interrupted. Relief swept him. On another night, another occasion, a time when a life was not in danger, he would have grinned all over the room. But tonight he merely shook his head and finished, "Angel, are you out of green stuff already?"

"Well, not out, Michael. But running low. I called because I thought perhaps I might get an advance on—"

"Can you get through the next five days on five hundred?"

"Oh, Michael, five hundred dollars is too much! I'll be in debt to you for life!"

"We'll talk about that angle when you return, Angel. I'll wire five in the morning."

"Ohhh, I like you, Michael Shayne! I didn't get you out of bed, did I? I mean, it must be after midnight down there."

He managed to laugh. "How do those California cats look to you?"

"I never saw so many medallions in my life!"

When Lucy Hamilton finally



got off the line, the detective put the phone together slowly. It was good to hear her voice, he decided, and she'd only been gone slightly more than twenty-four hours.

The gentle knock on the apartment front door found Shayne at the mirror again. He shot across the front room on long strides and yanked open the door.

The man who stood on his threshold was young, tall and

willowy. He had brown skin and wore a medium-priced pale yellow suit. Even though Shayne's battered face must have told the young man something his expression remained blank as he said, "You are to come with me, Mr. Shayne. My name is Emanuel."

Shayne was positive he had never seen Emanuel in his life but he did not question the young man's pedigree. The youth smelled of Rafel.

They went downstairs and outside the building in silence. Across the sidewalk, a dented Falcon was braked at the curbing. Behind the steering wheel was another dark young man. Shayne was ushered into the rear seat of the Falcon. They pulled away from the curbing smoothly. Neither of the men up front volunteered where he was going, so the detective sat back.

"Move to the right, please," said the driver in precise English. "You are blocking my rear view."

Shayne moved over and glanced across his shoulder and out the back window. A Volkswagen beetle was on their tail. The Volkswagen definitely was a shadow or a rear guard. It hung with them for approximately ten blocks and then veered off.

At the same intersection they were picked up by a dilapidated

panel truck. Neither the Falcon driver nor Emanuel got excited. Shayne settled down. The rear guard seemed to be functioning efficiently.

He was taken to a huge Catholic cathedral. Emanuel accompanied him up the wide front steps and into the dim interior of the church. Ten to fifteen young men and women were scattered in the pews. No one seemed to pay any particular attention to the two new men who had entered but Shayne had a hunch Alpha 66 was well represented among the hunched and seemingly reverent figures.

Emanuel touched the detective's arm and pointed to an empty pew. Shayne sat as Emanuel kneeled. Emanuel turned slightly and motioned Shayne up on his knees. When the detective was flanking the young man in the unfamiliar position, Emanuel reached deftly inside Shayne's coat and plucked out the gun. It disappeared under Emanuel's coat. Shayne wanted to protest, but Emanuel was crossing himself swiftly.

Fifteen minutes passed before the hooded priest showed. He appeared suddenly out of a deep shadow to the right of the wide altar. He genuflected, remained a moment on his knee, and then came back into the church proper along a side aisle, his fingers interlocked at his breast-

bone, his head bowed slightly, and his face totally hidden.

Shayne eyed the priest all the way back, but the priest did not look up. Where was Rafel? Perhaps the appearance of the priest was a signal. Perhaps the Mystery Man was among those huddled in the pews and the appearance of the priest told him that it now was safe both inside and outside the church for him to move over and converse with a detective.

The priest entered a confessional to Shayne's right-rear. He watched the figures around him, waiting for one to make a move. And then Emanuel nudged his ribs and leaned into his ear.

"It is time for confession," he said.

"Me?" Shayne blurted, surprised.

"Father Bascus hears confessions at all hours," said the dark man.

Shayne entered the confession booth, unable to totally rid himself of the notion that he was being put on. He stood in the blackness, unsure of what to do next.

"You kneel, my friend," said a soft voice in front of him. "It is proper procedure. You kneel, and you tell all. I am your confessor."

Shayne knelt.

"In your own words," said the voice on the other side of the

thin half-slotted partition. "We are safe here. I'm told this meeting is vital to each of us."

"Gentry found you," Shayne said as relief flooded him.

"Keep your voice low, Michael," Rafel said. "Confessions are never shouted."

Shayne, keeping his tone soft, told all. And Rafel did not interrupt. He even remained silent for a long while after the detective had quit talking and Shayne experienced a queasy feeling. Had Rafel not liked what he heard and silently slipped away?

"You still there?" Shayne blurted.

Rafel surprised him. "Bring Logetti to me," he said. "How long will it take to make the round trip?"

"You want the meet now?" the detective said.

"Now," Rafel said flatly. "But he must allow the Lane girl to come with you. Tell him that's a stipulation."

"How about his troops?"

Although Shayne could not see the Alpha leader, he had the distinct impression Rafel had smiled.

"He has his troops," Rafel said. "I have mine."

"The sale of guns isn't his real pitch, Rafel. Nobody is going to convince me a top mob man—"

"So we discover what his true want is, Michael," the Alpha

leader interrupted. "And we free the Lane girl."

"Okáy, pal. I'm with you. I'll need ninety minutes."

"Confession is good for the soul no matter the hour of day," Rafel chuckled. "Or haven't you heard?"

"Quit it. You're making a convert out of me."

X

EMANUEL AND HIS driver returned Mike Shayne to his apartment. Emanuel handed the detective his gun after Shayne had vacated the Falcon. The dark man said nothing and Shayne stood on the sidewalk for a moment, watching the taillights of the Falcon disappear.

The detective shook his head. Rafel was a pro. His troops were pros. The only reason they couldn't win the war with Fidel had to be numbers—and the lack of total and open U.S. commitment. Shayne tugged his ear. Certainly the latter decision was for wiser heads than his. And he wasn't sure who was right, Rafel or the hesitant U.S. heads. But, at the moment, he was on Rafel's side.

He broke speed limits and tested the alertness and dedication of police patrol car boys as he piloted the convertible out to the island bridge. One or the other—or perhaps both—failed to

materialize. He kept a sharp eye out for Gentry and Painter men on the peninsula side of the bridge, saw nothing out of the ordinary, and rolled onto the island.

By the time he had reached the closed mansion gate, headlights were strong in his rear view mirror. He sat at the iron gate with the convertible motor idling and made Logetti's watchdog come to him.

The watchdog was Alex.

"Oh, God, don't you ever get enough, Tootsie?" Alex bleated.

Shayne knew a tremendous urge to down this ape forever, make him a Bronx memory. But he growled, "Open, monkey—or it won't be me who splits your skull."

Alex hesitated, completely confused.

"Rafel is waiting for your super-chief," Shayne snarled.

Logetti moved swiftly when he got the word. He ordered his people around with unquestioned authority, and he dressed fast. When they had assembled in the large front room, Shayne inventoried the quartette and made no attempt to hide his elation as he delivered an ultimatum.

"Not without your hostage," he said.

Logetti tensed.

"We take the girl with us," Shayne said. "It's a stipulation,

Rafel talking. No girl, no meet. Your choice, hood."

Logetti hesitated only a fraction of a second, then he snapped at Jack the Mod, "Tell Jennifer she's going along—with the girl."

They traveled in three cars. Alex piloted the Buick Electra. Logetti, Jennifer and Cindy occupied the rear seat. Jack the Mod and Freddy used the LTD, and Shayne was the leader in the topdown convertible. Had they arrived at the cathedral at three o'clock in the afternoon, rather than three o'clock in the morning, some people might have wondered about the small number of mourners for a funeral.

They clustered on the sidewalk outside the cathedral. Logetti seemed calm but his henchmen were nervous. They kept shuffling feet and looking up and down the deserted street. Jennifer stood slightly aside with Cindy Lane in tow.

Shayne snapped, "We all go inside."

Logetti looked at his men. "Spread out when we get in there."

"This is Rafel's show," Shayne reminded him.

But Logetti had become a leader again.

"Is it, shamus? Jennifer, you and the girl stay with me."

They entered the cathedral

and Alex, Freddy and Jack the Mod branched off in three different directions immediately. Alex went left, Freddy to the right, over near the confessional, and Jack the Mod went about halfway down the center aisle!

Shayne remained with Logetti and the two women at the back of the church.

"Lead on, shamus," said the hood.

Shayne looked around, refusing to believe that so many people prayed at this hour of a morning. He glanced at Logetti. The hood was stone-faced and did not seem perturbed by the figures in the pews.

"The confessional booth," the detective said finally. He nodded to the booth. "Rafel awaits."

Logetti motioned Jennifer and Cindy Lane into a back booth. Then he walked to the confessional, moving as if he was on familiar ground.

Shayne remained standing behind Cindy Lane. He knew a tremendous urge to take out his gun and put the muzzle against Jennifer's spine, force her to remain immobile while Cindy left the booth and walked out of the church. A glance to his right stopped the move. Freddy was only a short distance away, and Freddy was staring at him. Freddy also had produced a gun. It dangled from his hand along his thigh.

Suddenly Shayne stiffened. Two doors on the confessional were opening. The 'priest' came out of the center door. He seemed at ease. Logetti stepped from the other door. He held a gun trained on Rafel. He wiggled the gun, moving Rafel toward Shayne, and the detective made a reflexive move with his hand, going for the gun in his shoulder rig. He stopped his hand halfway up his front. Freddy had moved his gun up from his thigh. He held it on Shayne.

The detective risked a glance around the church. No one stirred. If Rafel had men out there, why weren't they moving?

Rafel joined Shayne. Logetti kept his distance, his gun in plain sight. Rafel's smile was taut but he shrugged as if in resignation.

"It seems that I am going to take a trip to New York," he said.

Shayne stared.

"You too, shamus," Logetti said coldly. His eyes flicked to the pew. "Let's go, Jennifer."

She moved swiftly with Cindy Lane in tow out of the pew and turned out of the church. Shayne fell in beside Rafel as Jack the Mod and Alex closed in from their aisles. Jack the Mod dashes ahead and disappeared outside.

"Botched," Shayne growled.

"These things happen," replied Rafel.

The detective was immediate-

ly alert. Rafel was too at ease for the circumstance. It had to mean something was afoot. Rafel spoke with confidence and moved as if he was crossing the street just to get to the other sidewalk.

They left the church with Logetti and Alex behind them and Shayne knew fresh surprise. It was raining hard now, the rain coming straight down with no fanfare, no lightning or thunder. Down the wide steps and across the sidewalk the two doors of the Electra stood open.

"Roll," growled Logetti.

Jennifer piloted Cindy Lane out into the rain and down the steps. Shayne and Rafel followed. The detective hunched against the downpour and shot a glance up and down the sidewalk. He expected to find cars, Will Gentry men moving in from the right and left. But all he saw was a single man. The man was coming along the sidewalk from his left, his shoulders hunched against the rain and his head tucked low, a hat shadowing his face.

The man slouched along at a slow pace and, at a distance, turned up the steps of the cathedral. Shayne knew a sinking feeling. The man sought shelter, no more. He was not a Gentry man.

Shayne and Rafel were halfway across the sidewalk now,

Logetti and Alex tight on their backs. Ahead, Cindy Lane had ducked to enter the rear seat of the Buick. The detective was at the end of his rope. He stopped dead. Alex rammed into his back.

Shayne went down on one knee with a shout and shot an elbow back hard. He connected and heard Alex bellow. In the same instant, he was conscious of Rafael lashing out at Logetti. The sound of the gunshot was a roar in Shayne's ear and then he heard a scream.

He spun on his knee and rammed with the elbow. Shouts and cries and the slap of feet against wet concrete suddenly were all around him as he lashed out blindly. He came up and shot a fist against Alex's throat. Alex staggered back toward figures that were swooping down the church steps. Shayne saw Alex disappear into a cluster of those figures and go down, covered by four men.

Shayne whirled to find Rafael down on the sidewalk and Logetti leaping toward the Electra. A shot came from the Buick and a bulky shadow that had moved in beside the detective grunted loudly, then spun around and sat down hard on the sidewalk. In the instant of spinning, Shayne recognized Will Gentry. Gentry had a surprised look on his face as he sat.

The Electra shot away from the curbing and screeched out into the street. Taillights swaying, the Buick disappeared. Too late, a sedan far down the street leaped alive and rolled after the Buick, a red dome light flashing suddenly and a siren wailing against the rain. If Jack the Mod was any kind of driver at all, the police sedan didn't have a chance.

Shayne heard sobs and quickly found the hunched figure of a woman sitting on the curb in the rain, her feet buried in water up to her ankles. He hunched over Cindy Lane, drew her gently back up to the sidewalk, held her against his front.

"Are you hit?" he asked.

She shuddered, hung on him, said nothing.

He put her off his front, attempted to examine her in the blackness of the early morning and the rain. It was a quick examination but it was enough to tell him she was not leaking blood. Only her nerve ends were frayed.

A plain-clothed cop Shayne recognized moved in. Shayne gave Cindy to the cop and turned back to Will Gentry. Gentry still sat on the sidewalk. He was unmoving, two figures squatted in front of him. Shayne joined the figures.

"How about it, Will?"

"Head," Gentry grunted. "A

graze, I think. Did Logetti get away clean?"

"Clean," Shayne nodded.

"But we got one of his boys?"

"Somebody has him."

"Those are Rafel's people. Where's Rafel?"

"Right here," said the voice over Shayne. "I'm okay. None of my people are hurt."

"We blew it," said Gentry. And then he keeled over on the sidewalk. He lay sprawled with his face turned up to the rain.

XI

"WE THOUGHT WE had it put together," said Rafel as Will Gentry was loaded into the ambulance. "Between my people inside and Mr. Gentry's outside, we figured we could give Logetti plenty of rope and cut him off at any moment. It seemed important that I know what a New York gangster wanted with or from me. It still does."

"The gun sale was a come-on," grunted Shayne, watching the ambulance roll away.

"Logetti was going to take us to New York, Mike. Why?"

"I think I was excess baggage, pal. Something that couldn't just be dropped along the way, unless it was from ten thousand feet. Give me a moment and then let's talk to Alex. I owe that gunsel something anyway."

Shayne got two cops to take

Cindy Lane to her apartment. One would remain with her. Shayne would drop in on her later, relieve the cop.

The detective moved into the huddle on the church steps. Rafel was there, squatting beside a sprawled and flinching Alex. Rain beat down into Alex's face but his terror was not the raindrops.

Shayne gathered a fistful of Alex's shirt front, lifted the man slightly and then slapped him back against the steps.

"The pitch," he snarled. "You talk and live. Otherwise you go into the Everglades."

Alex was a tough nut. He babbled, but he said nothing as he pawed at Shayne's wrist. The detective bounced him a couple of times against the step, and then Rafel took over.

Rafel produced a banana knife from his priest's garb and hunched over the gangster. He put the point of the knife against Alex's skin just below his ear.

"A bit dramatic perhaps, my friend," he said to Shayne. "But—"

He pressed slightly with the knife and Alex squirmed. Someone stepped on Alex's biceps and someone else squatted on his legs. Rafel asked politely, "Are you going to tell me why your boss wanted me in New York?"

Alex blurted, "Sam Bascone!"

No one said anything and

Rafel looked up at Shayne. The detective frowned as he searched his memory. Sam Bascone had a familiar ring to it. But from where?

"The feds have got Sam," Alex bleated.

Shayne grunted. "Got it," he said. "I remember reading in the papers. Bascone is a biggie in Logetti's crowd. The Justice Department has him. They're putting on the screws. But that doesn't tell us why—"

"Trade!" gasped Alex as Rafel applied new knife pressure. "This guy for—this guy for Sam! A trade, man!"

Shayne tugged at his ear. Some light was coming through. He got down on a knee at Alex's head. Logetti figured on kidnapping Rafel, holding him in New York, and then trading him for Bascone?

"Spill it, Alex," the detective growled.

The hood squirmed. "Logetti says... this Rafel is important to some people. Yuh know, shamus, Washington people. He figures to put some screws on himself with the Justice boys. He figures to make an offer: turn Sam loose, clean bill, and Washington can have Rafel back. Don't ask me no more, 'cause—I don't know no more."

Shayne looked at Rafel. "Makes sense?"

Rafel shrugged.

"Logetti might have figured it that way, okay," Shayne nodded. "It's wild, but it's his kind of thinking. Pit one Washington agency against another. Justice must be scaring hell out of the mob with Sam Bascone under thumb."

Rafel kept the knife point against Alex. "Where do we find your Mr. Logetti now?"

Alex arched slightly, his eyes growing. "The strip..." he hissed.

"An airstrip?" Shayne shot at the hood.

"Yeah, yeah—"

"What airstrip?"

"I dunno."

"Put some pressure on him, Rafel."

"Hey!" yelled Alex, wriggling frantically, "I really dunno! Golden somethun, that's all I know!"

"Airgold?"

"Yeah, yeah—that's it."

"I know it," said Shayne. He got to his feet. Rafel stood. "It's an abandoned strip," said the detective. "A few years ago three or four guys planned an air freight business, built the strip; then went down the bank drain." He nudged Alex with the toe of his shoe. "Does Logetti have a plane waiting for him out there?"

"Yeah, yeah," said the hood.

"It's how we come down here."

The detective looked at Rafel. "Will Gentry might like to have Logetti," he said. "He's got a helluva start on us, but maybe the rain will keep them on the ground."

"Move out," said Rafel.

"Will will want Alex too."

"I've got a couple of men who can deliver him downtown."

Shayne piled into the soggy convertible and put the top up. He was soaked through and he paid no attention to the wet seat and the water that dripped from the dash. He watched a panel truck arrive at the curbing in front of the church. Rafel men climbed into the rear of the truck, then Rafel waved and got up front.

Shayne pulled around the truck, piloting the convertible reflexively as he mentally mapped the route. They were forty-five minutes to an hour from the airstrip, and this all could be a futile chase. But Will Gentry would want Logetti, and Will should be in a hospital bed by now.

Shayne turned onto a main thoroughfare and headed west, feeding power to the convertible. The panel truck remained close on his tail and the detective grinned once. For all of its dilapidated look, the panel seemed to have a powerful motor.

Shayne turned into the lead-in road. He had thought about attempting to slip undetected onto the strip, but the strip was in open country and it would take an extra hour to walk in. Besides, Logetti could be airborne and heading north if the pilot had been crazy enough to take off in the slashing rain.

The rain had picked up again and the wind was blowing hard out here in the open. The wind made dancing sheets of the rain.

The redhead rolled through an open gate in a wire fence and headed straight toward the black bulk of a single hangar. Headlights from the panel truck flicked on and off in his rear view mirror. He touched the brake pedal and pulled over.

The truck whisked around him and moved out toward the hangar. Shayne scowled and gunned after the taillights. What did Rafel have in mind?

The truck picked up speed and swung in a wide arc around a corner of the hangar. Shayne stomped on the accelerator and moved into the same turn. He felt the rear end of the convertible begin to come around in a wet skid. He maneuvered the steering wheel expertly, concentrating on coming out of the skid now. He saw the truck whip into a half skid far out from the hangar and then

The airstrip was black when the truck rock to a stop.

The rear door flew open and Shayne was reminded of a World War II invasion of long ago as the dark figures bailed out and scattered. The figures went forward in long low dives through the rain and then disappeared into the blackness of the ground.

The convertible went through what seemed a long slow circle, the rear coming around almost gracefully in the slide. Shayne held onto the steering wheel, riding out the skid and making no attempt to break it. He flipped off the ignition key and snapped out the headlights.

Suddenly he was stopped and he sat staring through the rain splashed windshield. Vaguely, off in the distance, he saw the dark bulk of an airplane. And then the windshield on the passenger side of the convertible splattered and the detective was rolling from the car.

He hit the ground hard and continued to roll as the sound of a second shot came to him. He heard the slug bounce off the convertible. He lay flat on his belly now, head up slightly, his gun in hand.

Dark figures appeared suddenly ahead of him, dashed, and then disappeared quickly over near the hangar. Rafel's men were spreading out and moving in. Shayne leaped to his feet and ran in a zig-zag course toward the

figures. A single shot came from the hangar as he stretched out like a swimmer in a racing dive and skidded across wet grass.

Then Rafel's shouted command came out of the slashing rain: "Load!"

Shayne tensed, every sense and nerve alive.

"Fire!"

The fusillade crackled across the night and the redhead instinctively tucked in his head. Then, abruptly, there was only the sound of the rain.

Shayne searched the darkness of the hangar for movement. Were those inside dead? Had they been gunned down as if prisoners of war lined up for execution?

The detective shook his head against the enormity of the moment, the cold savagery of Rafel and his men at war. And for some reason he did not want to move, he did not want to see the carnage inside the hangar.

Then he heard voices and he concentrated on the hangar. He saw shadowy figures coming out of its blackness. It seemed to him that the figures were moving hesitantly with their arms held high in surrender. He blinked hard and attempted to focus on the figures. They stood like statues now.

New figures materialized suddenly out of the ground and Shayne knew that Rafel's men

were moving in. He scrambled to his feet and dashed toward the forming cluster. Headlights from the panel truck came on and Shayne saw Logetti, his two henchmen, the woman and a stranger who wore a flight jacket and a billed cap. They stood in the headlights, their arms high as hands dashed over their bodies and removed weapons.

Shayne found Rafel and caught his arm. "Holy—"

But Rafel cut him off with a gentle laugh. "Nothing like a high volley, Michael, to test the true strength of the enemy."

XI

THEY PUT Logetti and his crowd inside the rear of the panel truck. Rafel men piled in behind them. The doors were banged shut and the truck moved off.

Rafel walked with Mike Shayne to the convertible.

"They'll be delivered," the Alpha leader said. He got into the convertible and settled on the wet seat. "It was good practice, Michael. Someday we'll be hitting other airstrips."

Shayne said nothing. He drove back into the city and deposited Rafel at the cathedral.

"An interesting evening, Michael," said the Alpha leader from the sidewalk. He grinned, and then he turned and went up

the steps and into the church.

Shayne drove across town to the hospital. Because of his appearance he had difficulty crashing the barrier of the lone nurse at the front desk. She thought he was coming into the hospital for treatment, and she insisted he go around to the Emergency Room. Then one of Will Gentry's men appeared from the interior of an elevator and saw Shayne.

"Mike," the policeman said. "Gentry's in 3B. He's doing okay. Just a crease across the side of his head. It stunned him. He wants out now, but the people here insist on keeping him the rest of the night."

A nurse waived and Shayne went up to 3B. Gentry was propped at a forty-five degree angle in the bed. He wore a turban of white bandage around his head. He stared at Shayne for a long time, his eyes taking in all of the tatter and wear.

"I almost hate to ask," he finally said.

"Not me alone, Will," Shayne protested. "In fact, not me at all. I merely was a scout pointing troops." He grinned suddenly and tugged at his ear. "Someday, fella, when things are getting dull downtown, tag along with Rafel and let him show you how to play war games."

It was four-thirty in the

morning and the rain had ended when Shayne left the hospital. He had relaxed and he was fatigued, but he felt at peace. Will Gentry had been filled in, and Gentry was pleased. He liked the idea of Logetti and his people being held downtown, and he already had called the city's top legal hawk. The hawk had been elated too, even though he had been yanked from slumber. The hawk was heading downtown to plan at least the next twenty five years of Logetti's life.

Shayne drove to Cindy Lane's apartment building and found a police detective parked against a window sill down the corridor from her door. He sent the police detective home as he put a long arm across the girl's shoulders and squeezed her.

She looked tired, but she had refreshed. She had bathed and now she wore pajamas and a robe and smelled faintly of pine. Shayne took a sleeve of the robe and pushed it up to look at her arm. There was a trace of a tiny needle puncture.

"They didn't give me anything, Michael," she faltered. "At least I didn't feel anything. I guess they were faking it for your benefit, but—oh, how they frightened me!"

Shayne knew new relief and he grinned crookedly and chuck-

ed the girl's jaw gently with his fist.

In his apartment later, he disrobed slowly and piled the rain-soaked clothing in the kitchen sink. He took down the bottle of cognac and dropped ice cubes into a glass. He took the bottle and the icewater into the bath, drew a hot tub and sat back. An hour later he flopped without ceremony into his bed and was instantly asleep.

The jangle of the telephone brought him awake at two-ten o'clock in the afternoon. He put the receiver against his ear as he squinted in disbelief at the clock.

"Michael?"

He came fully awake instantly at the sound of Lucy Hamilton's voice.

"Michael, have you wired the money?"

He grinned as he sat up in the bed. "Not yet, Angel," he said simply. "I forgot."

"Forgot!" The line went silent and his grin widened as he imagined the facial contortions at the other end. "Michael Shayne, I'm losing an entire day of—"

"Is man perfect, Angel?" Mike Shayne broke in with a chuckle.

"Not a certain redhead. I know!"

"I'll wire within the hour."

"Ohhh, men...!"



SAGITTARIUS

by GARY BRANDNER

Happiness waited for her in that room. Happiness—and a shadowy thing called Murder.

THE WOMAN SAID,
"You're a Leo, aren't you?"

She had flowing honey hair and chocolate eyes, and was standing in the doorway of a quaint cottage in Benedict Canyon, north of Beverly Hills. I felt like Hansel walking into the gingerbread house.

"Aren't you?" she said again.
"A Leo?"

"I was born August first," I admitted. "I guess that makes me a Leo."

"Thank goodness. But, of course, I was sure of it. I felt the good vibrations as soon as I saw you coming up the walk. I'm Aries, you see."

"Glad to hear it. My name is Dukane," I said, thinking she might have taken me for a client. "We talked on the phone."

"Yes. I am Roana Varga. Please come in." She stepped to one side of the door, and the loose red thing she wore moved with her body, touching it in

enough places to show that she was a well-turned woman.

"I hope you won't mind waiting a few minutes," she said. "This is the time I usually have lunch on the patio, but one of my people came in for a special reading. I won't be long."

"That's all right," I said, and followed her through a beaded curtain into a small room furnished in bold, cheerful patterns.

A young man sat leafing through an astrology magazine. He had a clean, boyish face that I had seen somewhere before.

"Dukane, this is Dean Fletcher," Roana Varga said. "I'll be through in a very few minutes."

She gave us a smile that brightened the room, and went through a door opposite the beaded curtain, closing it softly behind her."

"Are you one of her, uh, people?" Fletcher asked.

"No," I said.

"Good." He relaxed into a grin, and I knew where I'd seen him. "I don't believe in astrology myself," he said, "but my girl plans her life by it. She's in there now." He inclined his head toward the closed door. "Are you a friend of Roana Varga's?"

"You're on television, aren't you?" I said, evading his question.

"Yes, I am. *The Young Investigators*. Do you watch it?"

"Only once," I told him.

I didn't tell him how I felt about watching two grownup adolescents and a halfwit girl solve a series of murders and make boobs out of L.A.P.D.

"Maybe it's not the greatest show ever produced," he said modestly, "but I think it's got something to say."

"Does your friend act too?" I said, pointing a thumb toward the door.

"So far only small parts, but she's up for the lead in a series next season. They say she can be the new Ali McGraw."

"Good for her," I said, wondering when they had discarded the old Ali McGraw. "What do you suppose they do in the secret room?"

"Lord knows," Fletcher said. "Roana checks out the stars and tells you whether it's safe to get out of bed tomorrow, I guess. I tried to peek in there last week, but I barely got my head through the door and they chased me out."

The door opened then and a girl breezed into the room. She had the Now look: straight hair, no bra, unshaped eyebrows, and white lips. What, I wondered, ever happened to Maimie Van Doren?

"Dukane, this is Loree Markis," young Fletcher said as the new Ali McGraw sailed past me and out the door.

"Hurry, Dean," the girl said without slowing down. "I've got to be in Heidegger's office at one o'clock."

Fletcher shrugged apologetically.

"Don't mind her," he said. "You know how actresses are."

"Sure," I said.

He gave me a half wave and started after his girl, who was already getting into a sports car down on the street. On his way out Fletcher almost ran into a body-builder type with a bushel of shiny black hair that tumbled to his eyebrows.

Mister America ignored Fletcher's apology and glared at me.

"Are you the detective?" he growled.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Julian Galt, Miss Varga's business manager."

"So what?"

He inflated his chest under a form-fitting body shirt. "Don't tell me you're one of those two-fisted private eyes."

"No, I'm one of the new breed. We have three fists."

This chatter was cut off by Roana Varga.

"I see you two have met," she said. "Thank you for waiting, Dukane. Shall we get down to business?"

"Let's," I said. "You told me you received some threatening letters."

"Not letters, really, she said,

"just short notes. And I'm not even sure they're threatening."

"Well, I'm sure," Julian said, smoothing his hair with a gesture that made his biceps bulge like a cantaloupe.

"Julian is very protective," Roana said.

"I can see that," I told her. "Do you have the notes?"

"Yes, they're in here."

Julian and I followed her into the other room, the walls of which were covered with star charts. The only furniture was a small table and two chairs. On the table was a narrow glass vase with a single crimson rose in it. Roana opened a drawer in the table and took out two white envelopes.

"Let's take them out on the patio," she said. "We can talk over lunch."

The patio behind the cottage faced a hillside over-grown with a waist-high chaparral. The twelve signs of the zodiac marched around a circle set in the tile floor.

Roana sat Julian and me down at a glass-topped table and laid the envelopes in front of me.

"You can take a look at these while I get lunch," she said. "In my opinion they're just somebody's sick joke, but Julian felt we ought to do something."

Roana's address on the envelopes and the notes themselves were printed in schoolboy

block letters. The postmark carried a Hollywood zip code. One was mailed the previous day, the other a week earlier. From across the table Julian watched me suspiciously.

"Was it really your idea to call me?" I asked him.

"No way. My idea was to pack up and leave this crummy town. We could go to Florida where there aren't as many kooks and the beaches are better and they don't have earthquakes. They go for astrology down there too, but Roana didn't want to leave. I told her I was worried about those notes, and it was her idea to call in a detective. She picked you out of the phone book, worse luck."

I spread out one of the notes—the one with last week's postmark. It read:

STAR LADY—

READ YOUR OWN CHART.
YOU ARE RUNNING OUT OF
TIME.

SAGITTARIUS

Roana Varga came back carrying a tray with three tall glasses of a murky liquid.

"You'll like this," she said. "It's carrot and cucumber juice blended with wheat germ oil."

I pretended to take a sip and smacked my lips in appreciation. Setting the glass some distance away, I unfolded the second note—the one mailed the day before. This one read:

STAR LADY—

YOUR WHITE ROSE IS APPROPRIATE. IT IS A FLOWER FOR THE DEAD.

SAGITTARIUS

"How did you happen to call me instead of the police?" I asked.

"For a selfish motive, I'm afraid," Roana said. "I couldn't stand the publicity if these notes ever got into the paper. Even though most of my people are in show business and live very public lives, they want their astrologer, like their analyst, to stay out of the news.

"I learned that eighteen months ago when Eleanor Patton died. The press had a field day then with that 'Star Lady' business, and most of my people stopped coming. I had to leave the city for several months before things quieted down. I'm only now beginning to build up my clientele again."

"Eleanor Patton," I said. "She's the actress who ate a bottle of sleeping pills, then lay down to die surrounded by her horoscope charts, isn't she?"

"Yes. They were charts I had prepared for her. That's how my name came into it. To read the stories you would think that what happened was my fault. Actually, Eleanor's troubles go way back to when she was a teenager in New York and gave her baby up for adoption. No

matter how big a star she became after that, Eleanor could never forget the child she gave away. As she grew older and her looks faded, she couldn't take it. Eleanor Patton was destined to end tragically. It was in her stars."

"And you told her that?" I said.

"I told her the truth. Giving her a false reading would have changed nothing."

"I suppose not." I read over the two notes again. "What does Sagittarius mean to you?" I said.

Roana took a swallow of her health juice, which was apparently all we were getting for lunch. She said, "Sagittarius is the ninth size of the zodiac. People born from November 22 to December 21 are under this sign. It's ruling planet is Jupiter. It governs the thighs."

"Can you give me a list of people with those birthdates who come to you for readings?"

"Surely. Julian, would you get the Sagittarians for me? There's a good boy."

The muscle man got up from the table with a scowl at me and cat-footed back into the cottage.

"Do you really think one of my people would send me these notes and sign them with his own birth sign?" Roana asked.

"I don't know. It's a place to start. The notes have an odd sound to them, almost as though

the writer is trying to give you a hint. How about 'white rose'—does that mean anything?"

"No. I have rose bushes all along the side of the cottage, but they all have deep red flowers. I pick one every day for my bud vase."

Julian came back out with a dozen or so index cards and tossed them in front of me. I started to go through them, but Roana stopped me with a sudden hand on my arm.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Julie, what day was it you brought me the beautiful white roses?"

The big hunk of muscle actually blushed. "Aw, I don't know."

"Well, I do," Roana said. "It was last Tuesday night. A kind of anniversary for us," she explained to me. "Wednesday I put one in the bud vase. It's the only time I've had anything in there but a red rose."

I said, "How many people did you have in for a reading last Wednesday?"

"Only three. I kept the afternoon free, so Julian and I could drive up to Santa Barbara. Do you think it was one of them?"

"It seems like a good bet, since Sagittarius knew about the white rose. Who were the three people?"

Roana put two fingers to her

temple for a moment, thinking. "There was Bethyl Cave. You've probably seen her name in a hundred movie credits. She's head costume designer at Worldwide Studios. Then there was Sam Wycoff. He was a screen writer. *Is*, I should say. And the third you've already met—Loree Markis. Wednesday is her regular appointment, but this week she came a day early. She wanted to know if the stars were favorable for some business she had this afternoon with Abe Heidegger at Worldwide."

"The next question," I said, "has got to be: Which of those three is the Sagittarian?"

"None of them," she said, destroying my theory. "Bethyl Cave is Scorpio, Sam Wycoff is a Gemini, and Loree was born under Taurus."

"Hmm," I said, which is what I say to give the impression that I am thinking. "The white rose still seems to tie it to one of those three. I think I'll have a talk with them."

"You won't tell them you're a detective?"

"Not if I can help it. What's the top magazine in the stargazing field?"

"There's *Astrology Illustrated*—everybody reads that," she said.

"That will do for a cover," I said. "Oh, and one more thing. Julian. . .?"

"I'm a Cancer," the muscle man said.

"I should have known." I got out of there before Roana noticed I hadn't touched my lunch.

AT WORLDWIDE Studios my lie about being a reporter for *Astrology Illustrated*, plus some truthful flattery, got me past the redhead who guarded the door to Bethyl Cave's workshop.

The costume designer was a wiry woman in a tweed suit, with short hair poorly dyed to a shoe-polish black. As I walked in she was ripping the top of a dress away from an emaciated model.

"No, no, dammit, that's not what I want at all. You go back and tell Norman to for Chrissake follow my sketches."

The starving creature eased out the door with her bony hands demurely cupping her breasts, if any.

"How do you do, Miss Cave," I said. "My name is Dukane."

"So my receptionist told me," the wiry woman said. "You're with *Astrology Illustrated*."

"That's right. We're doing some vignettes on prominent Scorpio people. Could you give me a little background on your interest in astrology?"

"I'll tell you this, mister," she said, "I had my horoscope charted long before any of these new kids ever thought of it. That

was back in the—well, it was a few years ago. There was only a small group of us interested in the stars then, and we were serious about it. Not like these punks today with their zodiac posters and zodiac beer mugs and, for all I know, zodiac underwear.”

“I understand you’re with Roana Varga,” I said.

“Yeah. She’s not as good as some of the old-timers, but they’re all gone now. Still, Roana’s better than most of the new ones. At least she doesn’t stink up her place with awful incense.”

For the first time I noticed there was a man sitting in the corner of the cluttered room. He was not a small man, but he sat hunched into an insignificant mound.

Bethyl Cave followed my eyes.

“That’s my husband, Allen,” she said. “Allen was a big he-man cowboy - star in the thirties, weren’t you, Allen?” Her voice raked the man like a steel brush.

“Yes, Bethyl,” he said.

“Isn’t he a beauty?” she said to me. “He’s a Virgo, naturally.”

“Naturally,” I said.

The skeletal model came back in with repairs made to her upper clothing.

“That’s more like it,” Bethyl Cave said, rubbing her wrinkled hands together. “You’ll have to



go now, mister. I’ve got work to do.”

I retreated gladly, pausing just long enough to ask the redhead where I could find Abe Heidegger. She told me, and I ambled across the lot to the executive office building.

I located Heidegger’s suite and was told he was busy with Loree Markis, so I sat down to wait. When Loree came out an hour and a half later I had to jump into her path before she would notice me. I gave her the *Astrology Illustrated* spiel, and she consented to talk to me if I wanted to walk along with her to the parking lot.

“Why shouldn’t I be into astrology?” she said as we walked. “It’s what’s happening, you know. It’s where you can get it together.”

"What do you think of Roana Varga?"

"She's all right, I mean, for an older lady." Loree stopped and looked directly at me for the first time. "Hey, have I seen you before?"

"I was at Miss Varga's this morning when you came out. I was talking to your friend, Dean Fletcher."

"Oh. Do you know Dean?"

"Not well."

"He's a nice boy, but he'll never be a great actor. In pictures, I mean. I mean, television is all right, and it impresses some people that he's been on Broadway, but acting in pictures is where it's at, you know."

"Sure."

"There's my car now," she said, "so I'll leave you here."

Watching her walk away, I had an afterthought. "Miss Markis," I called.

"Yes?"

"Your friend, Dean Fletcher—what's his zodiac sign?"

Loree stared at me for a beat of five, then she said, "Pisces. Why?"

"No reason," I said, and trudged off to find my Chevy.

After a rare steak and a hooker of Hennessy for dinner I was ready to make my third and last call. I drove out to the Westwood address Roana gave me for Sam Wycoff, and pulled

up in front of an old two-story frame house.

In the dusk I could make out a slight, balding man on the porch talking to a couple of well-padded matrons. I sat in my car and smoked a cigarette while the ladies said their good-bys, then trooped down the steps and into their respective Cadillacs.

I took their place on the porch and rang the bell. The slight man pulled open the door and looked out with eyes that apologized for him.

"My name is Dukane," I told him. "I'm with *Astrology Illustrated*. We're doing a series on well-known Gemini people."

"If it's 'well-known' you're after, I think you got the wrong house," he said. "I haven't had a screen credit in four years. But come in, come in. It'll be a pleasure to talk to somebody who's a professional writer, in a manner of speaking."

I followed him through a dark hallway into a huge living room. The furniture was heavy and dark, not quite old enough to be antique.

"The place is too big for a man alone," he said. "My mother lived here with me until she passed away. I should sell the place, I guess, but where would I go?"

"I wonder if you'd tell me how you got started with astrology," I said.

Wycoff gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Why not? I tried everything else. When you haven't sold a thing in four years you get a little desperate. You saw those ladies leaving my house? You know who they are? My students. Sam Wycoff, once nominated for an Oscar, is teaching 'creative writing' to a bunch of hausfraus who took ceramics classes last year and will join encounter groups next year. If I thought I had to do this the rest of my life I would stick my head in the oven."

"I understand Roana Varga does your readings," I interrupted. "What's your opinion of her?"

"A nice girl," he said. "Honest, too. She could make a lot more money telling a person the things he wants to hear. Like, 'Sam, you're gonna be tapped to turn a new million-dollar novel into a screenplay.' Or, 'Sam, you're finally gonna sell that original you've had in the bottom of your trunk for years.' But Roana doesn't do that. She just tells me what she sees in the stars, good or bad. But at least she talks to me. That's something. When you're down in this town it's like you are all of a sudden invisible."

I thanked Sam Wycoff and said good night, feeling utterly depressed. I drove home, poured a heavy bourbon, and put on a

Segovia record. For my day's work I had the material for a short sociological piece about today's Hollywood, but I had no idea who was sending the Sagittarius notes to Roana Varga. After a while I felt tired enough to go to bed.

THE NEXT MORNING I sat in the office, sliding an ash tray back and forth across my desk. When this produced no ideas by eleven o'clock, it was time to call my client and deliver the bad news. The telephone rang before I could get my hand on it. It was Roana Varga.

"There was another note this morning," she said.

"Like the others?"

"Same kind of printing. Same postmark. It was mailed yesterday."

"Read it to me."

"It says, 'Star Lady, your detective cannot help you. You will never see the stars again.' It's signed 'Sagittarius.' Dukane, I'm scared this time."

"Is anybody there with you?"

"No, I'm alone. Julian went out right after the note came and I haven't seen him since."

"I'll be right over. Don't leave the house."

I locked up the office and wheeled west on Sunset, then up the canyon to the gingerbread cottage. I had a chilling couple of seconds when nobody answered

the door, but when I ran around to the back I found Roana safe on the patio, walking a slow circle over the zodiac signs in the floor.

She ran to me like a little girl when I stepped over the low stone wall. I held her for a moment and felt the beat of her heart through her thin dress. After a little while she stepped back and smiled at me shyly.

"Thanks," she said.

"My pleasure," I answered. "Roana, who did you tell that you were hiring a detective?"

"Nobody. I didn't tell a soul."

"Sagittarius knew," I said.

Roana's hand flew to her mouth. "But that could be only—"

I saw the shadow first, then the hand came around the side of the house. In the hand was a gun. I made a lunge and grabbed the oak-solid forearm just before it's owner stepped into sight. I banged the hand against the cottage wall and the gun jumped loose.

He came at me with both arms windmilling. He had beautiful muscles, but he couldn't fight a lick. I clipped him in the Adam's apple, and he went to his knees, gagging. I gave him my own knee in the forehead and he folded up on the tile.

Roana Varga ran to his side.

"Oh, no, Julian," she cried. "Not you!"

I walked over and picked up the gun while Julian got painfully to his feet.

"I just wanted to protect you," he gargled. "Went out to get a gun. Came back and heard voices. I thought—" The rest was lost in a fit of coughing.

Roana looked a question at me, but I was staring at the inlaid signs of the zodiac under her feet. I got it then, the way you finally come up with the key word of a crossword puzzle, and feel dumb because it took you so long.

Something moved up on the hill in the chaparral. Julian saw it at the same instant, and took a lurching step in front of Roana. There was a hiss, a thump, and a feathered shaft grew out of his upper chest.

Julian hit the tile again, and Roana screamed. I shoved her into the house and dived head first over the wall into the brush.

I kissed the ground and listened to the insects hum for a long sixty seconds. Mentally I kicked myself for not connecting Sagittarius sooner to the sign of the archer.

Raising my head to the top of the brush I yelled, "Come on down. I know you." Then I ate some more dirt, and the arrow split the air where my head had been.

Unless the archer had a repeating bow, I had maybe five

seconds to scare hell out of him. I jumped up and ran toward the spot where I'd seen the movement, screaming like a madman and firing Julian's gun in the air.

That did the trick. Twenty yards up the hill a figure rose out of the chaparral and threw a hunting bow at me. He tried to scramble away, but I had the momentum and hit him at the knees before he got going. When he hit the ground there was no more fight in him.

"Come on, Fletcher," I said. "Let's go down the hill."

Dean Fletcher sat like a sullen little boy while we waited for the police and the ambulance. To Roana he said, "I would have hit you if that fool hadn't jumped in the way. You should have died then for killing my mother."

"Who was your mother, Dean?" Roana asked quietly, but I think she knew the answer by then.

"My mother was the greatest actress I've ever seen—Eleanor Patton. I didn't know she was my mother until I was twelve years old and I found some papers that belonged to the people who adopted me. After that I saw every one of her movies over and over again, and saved every news story that mentioned her name.

"I became an actor myself in New York because I wanted to be like my mother. When I read

about how she died I came to Hollywood for one reason, to kill the 'Star Lady' who drove my mother to suicide. You had left town when I got here, but I knew you'd be back. It wasn't hard for me to get work here because I'm a good actor. When you returned I steered that brainless brat Loree Markis to you, so I would have a chance to come here and look around while I decided how to kill you. The notes were just to make you suffer a little more. Yesterday, when I heard your boyfriend call Dukane a detective, I knew I would have to act fast."

Fletcher stopped talking then and stared at his shoes while the sirens got louder.

The ambulance people came and carted off Julian, who had a slight hole in one of his muscles, but nothing that wouldn't mend. The police took Dean Fletcher away, and I was left with Roana.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"I think I have some cucumber juice, if you don't mind taking it straight."

"On second thought, no," I amended, starting for the door.

"Before you go, Dukane, could you answer a couple of questions?"

"For instance?"

"How did Dean know about the white rose in my bud vase?"

"That was the day he looked into the room while you and Loree were in there, and you chased him out."

"And you said he seemed to be trying to give me a hint in the notes. Did you mean by signing Sagittarius and then using a bow and arrow?"

"No, we couldn't have foreseen that. But by signing as Sagittarius he was telling us his name if we'd just taken it a couple of steps further."

"Am I going to have to pry it

out of you?" Roana asked.

"Sorry," I grinned, "but this is a detective's big moment, you know. Sagittarius, the archer, kills with an arrow. And what do you call a man who makes arrows?"

Roana Varga blinked at me several times, then comprehension came into her eyes. "A fletcher!"

Choking back an impulse to say, "Elementary, my dear," I winked at her and headed down the steps to my car.



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JIM MEMILLAN looked at his watch and returned it to his vest pocket. "All right," he said. "We have time for a drink before he comes. Let me tell you the arrangement. Then you can brief him on this job while I'm here."

He paused for a moment to organize his thoughts, while I poured a couple of glasses of scotch for us.

"His name's Sanders, Brian S. Sanders. Canadian. I'll give you his file with his background and so forth after he leaves. Gets five hundred a month from us through channels you may continue or not as you wish, but they have proved satisfactory so far. Now, and this is important, he is to be used *only* when you need him for a specific assignment.

"He is not to be used for gathering information, planting information, leaning on people, bodyguarding VIPs. When you need to have someone out of the way, you tell him you want the job done, and a general hint of why and how, and agree on a deadline. Like everyone else in this trade of ours, he's as punctual as a clock. Don't try to teach him his job. He's a pro. Any questions?"

I thought for a minute. "Do I know him if I see him outside?"

"No. If someone introduces him on the street, all right—But even then keep contact to a minimum. Otherwise you don't know each other."

"I take it he's my responsibility?"

"All yours, Art. He knows me

*Death waits at the end of each road
when you're tracking down the world's
most dangerous prey of all—Man!*



and he knew Ken. From now on you will be the one running him—if I want anything from him it'll be through you."

McMillan walked over to the window and looked out over the city of Beirut down to the harbor. "Lovely view you have here. Do all your apartments have views like this?"

"Well, my own apartment has a view that's better, and it has a terrace. The other two 'safe' houses have attractive views of walls and garbage dumps and things. This one I use for seeing Europeans and Americans; they don't attract any attention in this part of town. The others I use for everyone else, but an American would stick out like a sore thumb. You haven't touched your glass."

"Could I have some ice and soda?"

"Try it without, first," I said. "This is very special stuff."

"Hey!" he said, putting down his glass with surprise. "This is good! It must cost the earth. I didn't know we paid you that much."

"Do you think I could afford this stuff on what Mr. Helms pays me?" I growled. "It's lucky my old man left me enough so I can treat my boss to the finest scotch whenever he comes to Beirut to keep his eye on the peasants."

"Why do you think we hired

you, Art?" he asked with a laugh. "The CIA is a wise institution, and along with bright, upstanding, poor but patriotic citizens like me, we employ bright, upstanding, filthy-rich but patriotic citizens, like you. That way, we don't need to pad our expense accounts too much."

McMillan noticed my gun on the side table. "Is that one of the ones we sent you?" he asked.

"Yeah. You could at least have paid for those. As a matter of principle."

"Two hundred dollars each? You're out of your mind. As it was I had to pull all sorts of rank to have them sent over to you. What makes them so special?"

"Well, I figured I wasn't going to use them for sport. I want a gun that's an anchor. Something that hits where it's pointed and finishes what it hits. This is a Colt Commander .45. It's light but it fires a heavy hollow-point bullet at over one thousand feet per second. With this gun I can draw from the holster and put seven holes you can cover with your hand into a target twenty feet away, and do it in less than four seconds. That won't win me any medals, but I think it can help keep me alive. To be that fast you have to practice and practice and practice; and to get that kind of accuracy you have to pay money."

"I once did a favor to Jay Anderson, in Grand Junction, Colorado, and he fixed up these guns for me at cost, practically. You should see what he charges his other customers. When the airlines started searching people and using magnetometers and all that kind of crap, I decided it was time for me to plant a few guns around so that I could have a familiar one handy almost anywhere I landed, without having to worry about lugging one around."

He smiled and stretched out his long legs. I liked McMillan. Behind those tweedy good looks, grey eyes, grey hair, grey clipped mustache, that casual, assured, Harvard and Boston-banker manner, there was a ruthless and razor-sharp brain. And he seldom did anything without reason. His questions were not just small talk; he was all business, even though you might not realize it at the time—or ever.

The doorbell rang. He looked at his watch and nodded. Without a word to me, he went to the door and peered into the judas window set into the side of the doorway, while gun in hand I went to the other side of the room and stood in the shelter of a large closet. Routine precautions. With a glance to make sure I was ready, he opened the door to let in Sanders, then closed it and double barred it behind him.



When the door was locked I came out and put the Colt back in my pocket.

"Mr. Barrett, Major Sanders. Major Sanders, Mr. Barrett."

"How do you do."

"How do you do."

"Mr. Barrett replaces Mr. Wood. You will report to him in the future."

Sanders nodded without saying anything. He didn't seem very interested.

"Drink?" I asked. We're having scotch, but there's everything else if you like."

"Scotch is fine," Sanders said.

He had an extremely low, furry voice.

"Right," Jim McMillan said in his brisk, let's-get-to-business manner, pulling an envelope out of his pocket, "This is the man." He turned over the envelope and shook out some photographs. "Mr. Barrett?"

"Name of Delahaye, Etienne Delahaye," I said, taking over. "French passport, but very probably not French born. We're trying to trace him now but we've hit a blank on all known Russian agents. One thing we know, he's not known to the French intelligence agency. One other thing is sure, he was responsible for the death of Ken Wood. He came to Beirut five months ago, possibly with the specific aim of taking out Wood, possibly for another assignment in which he locked bumpers with Wood and had to kill him.

"This is his address, occupation, and other things. Look it over and tell me how soon you can tackle him."

I busied myself pouring drinks and surreptitiously looked Sanders over. Nothing that looked less like a professional killer could be imagined. He was about five foot six at the most, and not very heavily built, though not skinny. His lanky sandy hair was getting thin. He had a toothbrush mustache and pale blue eyes

behind the thickest lenses I have ever seen.

There were only two things that did not fit in with the Caspar Milquetoast image. One of them I had noticed when he walked in. He moved like a cat. He was wearing desert boots with crepe soles, but you got the impression that he would have been just as silent on clodhopper brogans.

There was an air of balance about him, a feeling that—like a cat—he would always land on his feet. The other thing I noticed was his hands. They were enormous, far out of proportion on his small frame, and starting from thick powerful wrists. He handled them with such grace, as he turned the pictures and papers over, that they seemed to have a life of their own.

After a while he looked up from the papers to Jim McMillan, who with a barely perceptive motion of his eyes directed his attention to me. He looked at me.

"Do you want to teach them a lesson, Mr. Barrett?" he asked in his soft voice.

I hesitated a second, looking for the right words. "Well, yes. But I don't want it to be so obvious that it will panic the local authorities into a full-scale investigation. An accident would do fine."

"Fair enough. Today is

Tuesday. Say by next Tuesday?" Sanders seemed as excited by the prospect as by the idea of picking up his laundry on the way home.

"Fine, but isn't it rather short notice? Do you think you can manage?"

"I think it can be arranged, Mr. Barrett," he said with a final air.

In a few minutes Sanders said good-by. I took my gun and stood behind the closet while McMillan let him out.

"What do you think of him?" Jim McMillan asked after he had locked the doors and we had sat down.

"Damned if I know. Cold-blooded, matter-of-fact bastard. Where does a professional assassin get his education?"

He waved his arm in the direction of his briefcase.

"You'll find his file entry in there. Destroy the paper when you've read it. I told you he was Canadian. Commandos. Unarmed-combat instructor. Got a Victoria Cross in the raid on Dieppe. There isn't any higher British medal for bravery.

"After the war he went all over the world as a soldier of fortune. South America, Indonesia, couple of African countries, you name it. Came here to Beirut, settled down, married a school teacher. Once in a blue moon the Agency decides

that someone in the pay of the secret service of another country is a hazard to the security of the Free World. We call on Major Brian S. Sanders, V.C., who looks at some pictures and reads a couple of pieces of paper, grunts, sips his drink, says good-by-and-thank-you—like a well-brought-up boy.

"And before the week is out the enemy agent is either (a) found garrotted in his car or (b) found dead as a mackerel with his throat cut from here to there or (c) found dead in his bedroom where he has committed suicide or (d) not found at all. For this valuable service the taxpayers of America pay .003 cents per each annum, and damn good value for money, I think, though most of them would howl to the moon if they heard about it."

"How'd a pipsqueak like that get into the commandos?" I asked.

"Art," McMillan said, speaking slowly and clearly, "Sanders is not a pipsqueak. You can make no worse mistake than to think so. Just thank your stars he's on our side. The V.C. is not a medal that is given to pussycats. He wiped out two machine gun nests that had an American and Canadian outfit pinned down, and he did it single-handed. As they were withdrawing, he tried to take out a shore installation too, also

singlehanded, and they turned on a searchlight that hit him square in the eyes at fifteen feet.

"He threw in his grenade just before he passed out, and cleaned up the installation, but he spent a few months in the hospital after that, and the rest of the war as an unarmed-combat instructor. How much do you weigh, Art? Two-ten? Two-fifteen? Big, tough football star at Princeton? Forget it. He's a good-natured man but keep your distance and don't ever underestimate him."

"What the hell, I didn't mean anything. I won't underestimate him. After all, you chose him. You must have your reasons. Now what do we do?"

McMillan looked at his watch again. "We go our separate ways, and meet—by accident—in the St. Georges bar in a couple of hours, where I will be surrounded by friends, and I will let you buy me a drink, after which I will take you all out to a restaurant I have just heard of where they are supposed to make the best *mouloukhieh* you have ever eaten."

II

WHEN I WALKED into the bar a couple of hours later, Jim McMillan was sitting with a group of men, journalists and businessmen. He waved at me to

join them, standing up and shaking hands with me when I came up.

"Good to see you, Art," he said. "You're looking fine."

"Good to see you again, Jim. What brings you to our part of the world and how long are you staying this time?"

"Banking for the bank, as usual. I told them the whole Middle East was in a financial crisis and the only thing that could possibly straighten it out was for me to come here and take a hand. I'll probably stay here a couple of days. After that I have to go to Istanbul. How's business with you?"

"Which business?" I asked, throwing up my arms in mock desperation. "Not that it matters. They're all lousy. You can't finance tourism when there are no tourists; you can't finance construction when nobody wants to construct; you can't sell steel when there's no construction. Some days you can't make a piaster, let alone a nickel. Of course I've only been here three months."

"That'll be the day," one of the journalists said, "when Art Barrett can't make money. That'll be a headline for you: *Mad Armenian Thrown for a Loss*. Times get really tough, you could always make a living playing poker with us poor underprivileged journalists. How

"much did you make the other night?"

"Saturday? Not very much consid—"

"Excuse me," one of the others, a man I had never met, interrupted. "Excuse me, are you the Art Barrett? The one who played end for Princeton?"

"Yeah. Guilty."

"Well, thank you, Art. You won a pile of money for me in the Harvard-Princeton game, your last year. Do you remember it, when you intercepted a pass and ran for a touchdown in the last minute? Boy oh boy, I can see it now."

"Sure," I grunted. "You can see it now, but all I remember is that bastard Andy Cramer coming around and flattening my ass the last play of the game. Bastard must have weighed a ton."

"Art, do you mind telling me, I mean, why do they call you the Mad Armenian? I mean with a name like Barrett."

"That's an easy one. My grandfather came to the States as a kid to make his fortune. His son decided to run for public office and simultaneously decided that Arshak Batmanian was too much of a handle for the good electors of the State of Vermont to grasp, so he changed it to Barton and then to Barrett. I was named Artin, which remained as Art."

"And did he win the election?" asked John Ware, an English journalist.

"No. He was beaten by someone called Aram Boghossian. He quit politics and went back into his father's business."

"Well," the football fan said. "Well. Wait till my wife hears this. Gentlemen, dinner's on me. We go anywhere you recom-



mend. I am inviting you all to dinner in honor of Art Barrett, the Mad Armenian, to whom I owe the fact that my poor bookie almost went out of business the day of the Harvard-Princeton game."

We went to a little restaurant that Jim McMillan suggested and had an excellent meal, as he had previously promised me. It was in a quiet backwater off the main streets, not far from the St. Georges Hotel, in an old redecorated house, and you had to ring a bell to be admitted.

We took a long time over drinks and ordering the meal, and still longer eating. After I

finally managed to get our host off the subject of my end run, Jim McMillan started John Ware talking about Middle East politics, and he gave us a wonderfully funny but accurate account of the local situation and rivalries.

It was nearly midnight when we left the restaurant. McMillan decided to go home to bed, but our host Peter Martin, John Ware and I went on to make a night of it by going to a nightclub to see a belly dancer.

We went to one of the popular nightclubs, where you saw a cross section of the rougher cuts of Beirut's population. It was not a place where you saw many foreigners, but I had made a point of going there fairly often, and though I look more Swedish than Armenian, I had also made a point of always talking Arabic and Armenian; so that after a while I was one of the regulars, and for all practical purposes no longer considered a foreigner but 'Khawaja (Mr.) Artin,' one of them.

It helped that I tipped rather lavishly, and that I had lowered the boom on two clowns who had tried to be funny about the dumb foreigner the second night I had gone there.

By the time we reached the nightclub, most of the preliminary cabaret turns had already gone on, and we sat through one

or two rather feeble ones before the star turn of the evening came on.

She did her stuff, and damn good it was, too. Most belly dancers are competent, and most of them are pretty, but the difference between the competent and the really good is indescribable. The difference is between a half-naked girl wiggling her hips and a woman setting a crowded room on fire. There is a sort of electricity about the really good belly dancers that can't be duplicated by just any phony with a pretty face and figure.

When the dance was over, the place exploded in a riot of applause and table pounding. Everybody, and that included us, cheered and cheered. As she came running down from the stage a man sitting with his back to us, a thickset man with pale hair brushed back, stopped her with a motion of his hand and said something. She leaned over to him with a smile and they exchanged some words. It was obvious that they knew each other very well. Suddenly, looking up, she went white, quickly said something and ran off to her room.

"What the hell is that damn fool up to?" Ware said in wonder. "Doesn't he know everyone is watching? Someone should tell him that she's the

mistress of one of the most dangerous gangsters in Beirut. That group behind us—don't look now—the young chap sitting in the corner with two or three chaps around him. He's a real bastard. He's supposed to be the king of the docks. A pathological, sadistic bastard; jealous, vindictive. Our blond friend's in trouble."

We finished our drinks and got up to go. As we went out through the doorway, there was a crowd of people leaving and we were blocked for a while.

"*Marhaba, Khawaja Artin!*" a couple of taxi drivers yelled in greeting. "Do you want a taxi, *Khawaja Artin?*"

I yelled back at them that we had a car and we went out. Ahead of us was the man with the pale hair, and as he started to go down the stairs there was a ripple of people making way around him, and three men approached him. They were typical Beirut hardcases, burly gorillas with arms like sides of beef. One of them jostled him very obviously and swore.

"Are you blind, you son of a whore?"

The pale-haired man paused for a second, then continued to go down the stairs, and the thug reached for his shoulder to spin him around, cocking his huge fist as he did so.

He never finished. Moving as

fast as any man I've ever seen, the pale-haired man went in under the thug's hand and hit him, hard, in the solar plexus. He went on turning and tailgated the second man across the neck, then kicked out with his foot and caught the third on the knee with a sickening crunch of broken bone we could hear where we stood. The second two he hit went down and stayed down, the first man swayed, doubled up, his hands buried in his belly. The pale-haired man brought his hand down hard on his kidney and, as the man went down like a poleaxed steer, he looked around him coldly and calmly, then walked down the stairs and into the street and away.

"Great sodding balls of fire!" John Ware said. "Who in the name of Christ was that? Super Bloody Batman?"

"Near enough," I muttered under my breath. I had recognized the pale-haired man. It was Etienne Delahaye.

III

JIM McMILLAN said, "Look," in an icy voice, stopping his pacing in front of my window and turning to glare at me. "Let's get this absolutely straight: Are you questioning my judgment? Are you thinking of disobeying orders?"

"Hell, no, Jim," I said. "I've worked for you long enough not to do a damn fool thing like that. All I'm saying is that I knew Ken Wood and I've seen him move, and when I heard what happened to him I figured that whoever could take him was pretty deadly. And last night I saw Delahaye in action and by God he was deadly.

"Now I don't know about Sanders. We're old enough to know that for this work you don't need a movie-star kind of toughness, but Christ, Jim, have a heart! Sure this guy was tough as hell, once, but he's been out of combat since the war, he moves like a tortoise, he's got a wife and kiddies, he wears bottle bottoms for glasses.

"And you want to send him up against a rock scorpion like this Delahaye? This is nineteen seventy-one, Jim, and the only fighting the beaches of Dieppe see is when two studs reach for the same broad, who wasn't even born when the Canadians landed. Anything you say goes, but if it comes to a Pier Six brawl, frankly I'd be much happier if I was in there and not Sanders."

"Have you finished? Are you through?"

"Sure."

"Good. Listen then. I've told you before and I'm telling you again, but this is the last lecture I give you: We're here to do a job.

We are professionals. Pros. We are not the local adolescents indulging in Saturday night fisticuffs after the Homecoming Game. We're here to do a job.

"Major Sanders is a pro. He won't get into any Pier Six brawl with anybody. Should he do so, I have no doubt that our solicitude would be wasted on him. You are a professional spy. You have had occasion in the course of your duty to kill someone; you may have to again. But that is a byproduct of your job and not its aim. The aim of your job is to gather information about the Middle East, and to tackle specific assignments as I pass them on to you. Your assignment right now is to direct Sanders to kill Delahaye, and to find out why Kenneth Wood was murdered—"he gave an ironic bow—"if possible without getting yourself killed."

He paused for a minute, seeming to make an effort to control himself, then he said more gently: "Art, I know how you felt about Ken. I know how close you two were, but don't forget that he was my favorite nephew. What you and I feel is not important. This is duty, not private revenge, and as duty, I'm giving you an order—your directions to Sanders are to stand, and you are not to interfere in any way. Now let's have a drink. We need to have some stimulation to

get somewhere with these papers Ken left."

McMillan reached into his briefcase and brought out a few papers that I had seen before so many times. They were the only papers that Ken had left that were not accountable for.

We strongly suspected that they were really the trivialities they seemed on the surface. Yet they were about the only thing we had. All we knew was that we had started to get a stream of messages saying he was on to something big, then suddenly he had been found in his bathtub with a needle beside him and a tremendous overdose of heroin in his blood.

The verdict was suicide. There was a bruise on the side of his head and the pathologist said that it was consistent with his falling sideways in the bathtub. The talk around Beirut was that he'd become an addict.

Sure. Yeah, sure. So now we were putting together a jigsaw puzzle with no pieces, and all we had to work on was a few vague messages and the fact that the other side thought the subject important enough to kill an agent for it.

This is not as usual an occurrence as is often imagined. The various sides in the game know who the players, or most of them, are, and they keep to the rules to a certain extent.



There's no sense in rocking the boat. They certainly knew that James Winthrop McMillan was not merely a vice-president of a Boston bank; and they very probably knew that the jolly young Armenian with the improbable name was a resident CIA agent in Beirut. We certainly knew who their top men were, and even some of their strongarm boys, like Delahaye.

Suddenly McMillan choked on his drink and started to laugh. I was surprised because he had been madder than I'd ever seen him. After a while he stopped laughing, took a good swig of his drink and went back to looking at the papers.

"What's so funny?" I asked cautiously.

"What's so funny?" he re-

peated. "Can't you see the situation?"

"Well, frankly, no."

"Look. Delahaye has a run-in with a well-known local gangster over a girl. The gangster sends his hard boys to mop up the floor with Delahaye. The three hard boys wind up in the hospital; the one who got it in the leg probably crippled for life. All very public, lots of witnesses to the girl flirting with Delahaye, the guys provoking him, the beating he gave them. The gangster looks like an utter fool.

"A few days later Delahaye dies. Everybody will immediately suspect the gangster. He will be questioned, but he'll probably have a perfect alibi. Everyone will cry "fix." Delahaye's employer's will know the truth, but they can hardly say anything about it. The gangster, whatever his name was, will have to let people believe he was responsible so that he will regain respect. Son, we're home and dry."

"Yeah," I thought to myself, but damn well didn't say, "*unless Delahaye makes shish kabab of our boy first.*"

McMillan straightened up his tie and put on his jacket. "By the way," he said with a poker face, "I can assume that the two gorillas tailing me about the place are ours."

"All right," I confessed. "If you insist on not carrying a gun,

and chasing around where I'm not there to lend a helping hand, carrying a briefcase with half the secrets of NATO inside it, in defiance of the laws of God and man and the Central Intelligence Agency, I have to take precautions to see that nobody bothers you. And I'd appreciate it if you'd stick to the driver I got for you."

"All right, all right. I assume it's necessary, even for a harmless senior citizen like me."

I didn't say anything and he went out. Standing by the window, my drink in my hand, I thought, to hell with it. In my turn I straightened up my tie, put on my jacket and went out, having slipped a little Remington .380 auto into my pants pocket, loaded with my own hollow-points.

It is a lovely pistol, no longer in production; the smoothest, cleanest-lined pistol ever made, an ideal for times when you're dressed up, need a heater and don't want to bulge with hardware. You can carry it cocked with the safety off. It has a good grip safety and you don't have to worry about it going off by accident and making a little girl of you.

At the Alumni Club—it's not really a club but a hotel—John Ware was holding up the bar as usual. Even before I entered the bar I could see his great height

shooting up from the bar stool, topped by his almost completely bald head.

He was about my height, over six feet, but he was the skinniest man I've ever seen. He was surrounded by people. Whenever John Ware sat at a bar, he was surrounded by people listening to his stories, which were the funniest I've ever heard.

"Why the glum visage, man?" he asked. "Have a drink. That'll make the uglies disappear. Never fails."

"I don't know," I said. "I think I need a new girl."

"Splendid idea," he said enthusiastically. "So do I. You've come to the right place. Big party over at Mendoza's on the airport road. Choicest crumpet in Beirut. Why don't we have a bite to eat and go on there? Things don't start to swing until fairly late. Don't mind telling you, I'm feeling a mite ropy meself."

"Who invited me?"

"I did, old man," Ware replied cheerfully. "The host's an old friend of mine and anyone I bring is more than welcome. Even if they don't have your legendary charm."

We ate at *al Ajami*, which used to have the best food in Beirut. Its standards haven't declined; it's just that the other restaurants have gotten so much better. We ate enormous

amounts of the local foods. Both of us were pretty strong eaters, and it became a sort of competition. But with great reluctance we were obliged to bypass the garlic. We had important projects in mind, and garlic breath would ruin our plans.

"Let's take two cars," I said. "You never can tell, I hope."

"Right-o. Follow me."

The party was in fully swing when we got there, and as John Ware had promised, the place was full of pretty girls and in the right proportion, too.

Ware introduced me to the host, Pablo Mendoza, a flashy, muscular young South American diplomat with casual-but-oh-so-elegant clothes and a dazzling smile. He had two young ladies hanging on him when we walked in, but very politely shook them off long enough to welcome us and give us drinks in glasses the size of flowerpots.

The house was huge. There were rooms and rooms and rooms. We walked into the first one and found it empty. We walked into the second, switched on the light, then backed out hastily. The party was further along than we had expected. Pretty soon we came to a room where there were a lot of people sitting around and listening to music and dancing. Two lovely American girls waved to John

Ware and we went over to join them.

"This is me old friend Art," he said. "Polly Christian, Sally Hendricks."

Then I knew we'd come to the right party. Sally was a statuesque blonde with long hair, an extraordinary figure, blue eyes and a sulky mouth, while Polly was a long-legged, slim girl with brown hair cut very short and lively, humorous, intelligent eyes.

I tried to strike up a conversation with Sally but she didn't seem very interested, and soon enough I gave up. Polly and I, on the other hand, got along like a house on fire, and it wasn't long before I forgot everyone in the room except her. After a while we danced. First we did the neck-snapping, back-jerking dance that was 'in' that particular week, I forget its name; then, because this was Beirut and our host a Latin American, we started doing cha-chas and tangos.

She was a damn good dancer. We were all over the floor where the hi-fi was playing and then in another room and then in yet another room by ourselves. We danced slowly and easily, and I found out what a lovely body she had, fitting comfortably against me. A nice girl that I could dance with properly, and

not have to bend over into a U-shape for.

We sat down and started to talk quietly. She was as nice to talk to as she'd been easy to dance with. She could tease without being nasty, be serious without being corny and funny without making a production of it. Soon we had established a very strong bond between us, and I began to be very careful as I sure as hell didn't want to do or say the wrong thing and wreck what promised to be a very enjoyable relationship.

Suddenly she looked at me very seriously and ran a finger, very lightly, down my cheek. "Do you know what you want?" she asked me.

"Yes. Aside from that, what do you have in mind?"

"You need a drink. I'll get one for you."

I said, surprised, "I do need a drink, but I can get it myself."

"Don't be silly," she said. "This is the Middle East, remember? I will get you a drink, and I promise not to call you a chauvinist pig."

She ran out of the room, bumping into a bunch of people coming in, some of whom I knew. They said hello, spread around and sat down.

"Art," said one, a joker. "This is the first time in history that any girl has run out of a room and you were in. Usually they break

the doors down coming in. What did you do, you villainous beast? 'Fess up."

"Just a small attempted rape," I said. "No harm in trying."

Sally stuck her head through the door, hesitated, then walked in. "Art," she said softly, "come with me for a minute."

I got up and followed her out of the room to a chorus of stage whispers: "There he goes again. . . ." "How does he do it?"

"Art, you've got to drive me home. I want to talk to you."

"I'm sorry. I'm waiting for Polly. I can't leave without her. She'll be back in a minute."

Mendoza came up at that moment. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me on the mouth, and Mendoza, walking by, winked at me and kept on walking.

When he had gone she said, "Listen. Don't worry about Polly. She'll understand. She's my best friend. Wait for me in your car. I'll tell her. Go. What's your car?"

I told her and went out and scratched my head. I suppose I'm as cocky as the next guy, but the idea of a luscious morsel like that throwing herself at me all of a sudden was something I couldn't buy. If we'd been together all evening and I'd ignored her and made a play for someone else, I could see that she might try



something; but, as I say, the way it was I wasn't buying it.

So I figured I might as well find out what the hell it's all about, and see if I could patch things up with Polly the next day. In a few minutes Sally came out and we drove in silence to her house. I parked the car around the corner and we went upstairs.

"Why are you smiling like a cat that's just been swallowed by a canary?" I asked her after she had fixed up a couple of drinks and we'd sat down.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I've brought you here under false pretenses. Polly's too good a friend of mine. I want to talk to you and I couldn't tell you why because Mendoza came up just then." The smile left her face. "I just found out who you are. I want to talk to you about Ken Wood. You were his roommate in Princeton, weren't you? And his business partner one time?"

"Yes. Did you know him?" "He told me a lot about you. He gave me something for you."

"What?" I asked, trying to sound reasonably calm.

"We were on a picnic, a big bunch of us, and when we came back I could see he had something on his mind. I'd only known him for a couple of weeks, but I'd gotten to know him pretty well. I realize now that I'd fallen in love with him. Anyway, he was worried about something and wouldn't say what, and he mentioned you. You're here to find out how he died, aren't you?"

"I thought he committed suicide."

"You don't really believe Ken would commit suicide, do you? You don't really believe he was a junky, do you? Only one of the idiots on the Beirut cocktail circuit would believe something like that. I'm no authority on addicts but I have seen some, and Ken wasn't one. Ken was murdered."

"What makes you say that? What did he give you for me?"

"After the picnic he drove me here and I asked him up for a drink. Sat there, where you're sitting, brooding. I had designs on him, of course. He was a damned attractive man and I was in love with him, but I could see that that night he was somewhere else. So finally I asked him if there was anything I could do to help him. He said he'd think about it, thanked me and left."

"Half an hour later he came back with a briefcase which he handed me and said that I should give it back to him if he asked for it. Or to you. No one else. He kept repeating that. No one else. He said it should be put in the safest place I knew. Then he gave that radiant smile of his, kissed me and left. I never saw him again. He was found dead the next day."

She turned her face from me and busied herself making drinks until she could control her voice again.

"I put the case in a bank vault and left the key and the identification card at a friend's house without telling her what they were. The next day my house was burgled while I was out. They didn't take anything; they turned the house upside down, but they didn't take anything. They were looking for the briefcase."

"Who's they?"

"You tell me. And tell me, was Ken a spy?"

I lied without hesitation. "Not that I know of, and I'd know if anyone did. What happened next?"

"The day after that my poor little brother George was killed in a car accident. He and I were the only ones in the family and we were very close."

"I'm sorry to hear that. How old was he?"

"Twenty-three. He'd just come up for a holiday from his work in Abu Habbal in the Gulf. He'd been there almost a year and he was exhausted. We'd inherited this mining company of my uncle's and he was prospecting down there."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said again. Then, after a small pause, "What happened to the briefcase?"

"I'll get it for you tomorrow. No. Wait. The woman I left the key with won't be back till tomorrow afternoon. Say the day after tomorrow?"

"Have you told any of this to the police?"

"The police? Art, how long have you been here that you can ask foolish questions like that? The police? Of course not!"

I finished my drink and went. That night I slept the sleep of the just. It was possible, just possible, that we were about to find out what the whole can of worms was.

IV

THE NEXT MORNING I told Jim McMillan what Sally Hendricks had told me, and I could see that he was as excited as I was by the possibilities, but there was no way he could put off his trip to Istanbul. He told me to report anything that happened as soon as it happened. We made up

a jargon code for use should it be necessary to use the phone on an open line. We had one more drink at the St. Georges bar, and I drove him to the airport.

Back in town, I went to the office and started to do some work on my steel importing business, which had been suffering since McMillan's arrival, but I was interrupted by a phone call.

"Hello, you uncouth, barbaric baboon," a soft, beautiful voice said.

"Obviously you have the right party," I said. "May I ask who's calling?"

"You don't even recognize my voice. I don't know why I should even bother with you," she said.

"Of course I recognize your voice, Polly," I said. "It turns me on so much that I have to make excuses to keep you talking, so I can listen to it some more. Will you forgive me?"

"Call that an apology?"

"How would you like me to apologize? Say the word."

"Take me out to dinner tonight."

"Done and done. Eight-thirty?"

"Eight-thirty."

When I had finished my work, I sat and thought for a while about my reasons for being here in Beirut. Ken Wood had been a real friend, and his friendship had meant a lot to me. We had

roomed together in Princeton, we had played football together, we had started a successful business together. When we had had to break up the company he had joined the Agency on the recommendation of his uncle, and I had later joined them there.

We had made a good team in whatever we had tried for, and I felt frustrated as hell at not having taken care of his killer personally. I was particularly frustrated because I had an idea that the cause of his death was a fault I had often rebuked him for.

"You're too goddamn trusting," I used to say. "You and your goddamn Yankee blue blood. You're sure no one would dare cheat you."

"Relax," he would say. "You Armenians are very good at suspicion. You do it for me. I trust you."

It was hopeless arguing with him. But the contents of his briefcase might give us the answer, though they would not bring him back. Naturally, in order to avoid any suspicion of connection, I wasn't going anywhere near Sally, though I had enough of my operatives watching her. She was the best-guarded girl in Beirut.

I double checked the locks on the doors and windows, switched off the lights, switched on the

alarm system and went off to have a drink at the Alumni Club.

I still had a couple of hours to go before picking up Polly. Various people came in and out. John Ware started telling us about his adventurous life—Berlin during the airlift, Korea, Vietnam. He was so funny a man fell off a bar stool listening to him. The thing I liked about him was that he never used his wit at anyone's expense.

At eight o'clock I went to pick up Polly.—She was ready when I got there, and the sight of her lovely legs in her miniskirt made me glad of the stiff drink she offered me. We had drinks at the roof bar of a hotel by the sea, then we drove out to a new restaurant on the seashore and had a fabulous meal of the best seafood I'd had since the last time I'd been to Boston.

"Sally called me up this morning," she said, "and explained why she hijacked you. I didn't know you were Ken's friend."

"Yes," I said. "We went to college together."

"Poor girl. You know she hasn't been to a party since this thing happened. We were all at a picnic together and then this; and two days later her brother. I had to scream at her to make her come to the party last night. No wonder she gave you the cold shoulder. She found herself being

irresistibly drawn to your wildly attractive ways. Then she remembered Ken, and that was that."

"And you?" I asked. "Are you irresistibly drawn...what-ever it is?"

"No. I think you're a creep. But I like the way you dance. If you take me dancing afterwards maybe I'll let you write down the numbers when I measure myself for a new skirt."

"Tell you what. You write the numbers and I'll handle the tape. When do you intend to get a new skirt?"

"That depends on how well you dance."

After dinner, we had a cup of coffee, and the manager came up. He was a tall, elegant man in his late fifties, bald, with a long nose and beautiful green eyes. There were three reasons I liked to patronize his restaurants, the old one and this new one. Any restaurant he ran was a damned good one by any standards. The food was excellent, the setting tasteful, the service impeccable. And he had an eye for the girls that was, even at his years, still keen and alert. He knew them all.

"Ah, Monsieur Artin," he said, "one was not aware you were here with this charming young lady. One hopes everything is as it should be. Was the meal satisfactory? Say a word and the chef will be fired."

"On the contrary," I said. "I would be most happy if you would be so good as to convey to the chef my compliments for an excellent meal. I have seldom had shellfish cooked as deliciously as this."

"Thank you. He will be delighted. Would you like a cognac? One has a special bottle one hides from one's clients."

"Only on condition that you join us," I said, pulling out a chair for him and standing up. "Miss Christian, may I present Monsieur Haretoun; Monsieur Haretoun, Miss Christian."

He sat down and lifted his head slightly. As if by magic a waiter appeared. He whispered something to him and the waiter went off. He came back with a plain bottle and some thin glasses.

"We will drink an ancient Armenian toast to Miss Christian," he said, lifting his glass and doing so.

I lifted my glass and said, also in Armenian, "Keep your hands off this one, you old goat. I saw her first."

We drank solemnly. You had to hand it to him, he didn't bat an eyelash. A cool customer, our M. Haretoun. No wonder he made out well with the girls, even with his bald head and his age.

The brandy was special all right. The best brandy I've ever

had, and I've had quite a few. Even Polly was impressed. He smiled and poured another glass for us.

"How is business?" I asked him, knowing that he wasn't there only because of Miss Christian's beautiful eyes. For many years he had been, and still was, one of the best informed people in the Middle East. If there was a rumor or an item of information floating around anywhere in Beirut, he would nail it as it went by.

"Good," he said. "In general very good. The old clients from the other place show a commendable loyalty, and one is getting many new ones of the right kind. But the road is bad. Accidents happen. Did you see any accidents on the way?"

"No."

"Well," he said with a sigh, "accidents are always happening. When you drive tonight, be sure to be very careful. One would hate the idea of hearing you have had an accident. Do not let your understandable attention to Mademoiselle Christian distract you from the road. Please be careful tonight. Very careful. Now one must leave you."

When we got up to leave a few minutes later, a waiter came up with a neatly-wrapped bottle, compliments of Monsieur Har-etoun. We went to the *Caves du Roy*, where the crush was just

beginning. We danced and danced and had a couple of drinks and danced some more. The whole place was jumping and there was no nonsense about tangos. Then the music stopped for a minute and we stood in the middle of the dance floor.

Polly looked up at me and said: "Let's go."

I paid the bill and we walked out.

"Khawaja Artin! Khawaja Artin! Shall I bring your car?"

Little lame Hamid came limping up, yelling my name. He used to bring my car whenever it was parked more than fifteen feet away from the door. He was supposed to be doing me a service, but both of us knew that he loved driving the Ferrari, even if it was only around the block. Still, I always gave him a few piasters to keep up the fiction.

Among his many qualities was the fact that he had some used parking tickets. If you were a good customer he would park your car in a no-parking zone and put a phony ticket on it in case a nosy inspector came around. The cop on the beat, of course, was paid off.

"Well, the Mad Armenian! Whaddayaknow for sure?"

It was my friend the football fan Pete Martin and his wife, whom he introduced. We 'how-areyou'd' for a couple of minutes and waited for my car to come



drying on his head. The alley was deserted, as it always is at that time of night. I leaned over and felt his pulse. It was throbbing, not too feebly. I examined his wound. It was a bad bruise, probably made with a gun butt, but it did not seem too serious.

The door of the car was ajar, but the keys were still in the boy's hand. I slapped him gently on the cheeks until he opened his eyes. He groaned, slowly got to his feet, staggered around the car and heaved up his dinner. Then he staggered back.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know, *Khawaja* Artin," he said, feeling his head gingerly. "I came up and a man had the door opened and his head under the dashboard. When I asked him what he was doing he hit me over the head with a monkey wrench. I couldn't see his face; he was wearing Arab clothes and the headcloth covered his face."

"Look," I said, giving him a few pound notes. "Go home and go to bed and don't tell anyone about this, understand? This is between us."

When he had gone I took a little tube of dental floss out of my pocket and unwound about five yards of it—all there was—and tied one end to the door. I wished I had five hundred yards. Then I lay down on the ground with the other end of the

around. They insisted on our joining them for a drink and we kept fobbing them off.

"I think he probably flooded the engine," I said finally. "I'll go and get the car."

I went around the corner. Hamid was lying on the ground by the car, a trickle of blood

floss in my hand. If anyone came around the corner he would think I was nuts, but that was a chance I had to take. I swung the door open and simultaneously clapped my hands to my ears.

Nothing happened.

I waited a few seconds, then got up, dusted off my clothes and face, and approached the car. I knew damned well I was going to find something. People don't steal Ferraris, not in Beirut. They're too hard to hide. And if someone decided to steal one, he wouldn't need a monkey wrench. I looked under the dashboard. Nothing. Finally, I screwed up my courage and opened up the hood.

Lovely.

Neatly installed behind the engine was a bomb, a shaped charge big enough to blow a hole in the armor of a Sherman tank. It was set so the force of the explosion would hit me right in midsection. It was wired to the ignition. At a guess, I would say that the first twist of the starter would have sent me to my ancestors with the speed of lightning and in the consistency of scrambled eggs.

Very carefully, I cut the wiring with my pocket knife, then checked and double checked the rest of the car just to make sure. In my memory was the story of the Alfa Romeo left by the Mafia in Sicily with a

bomb on the back seat. The police quickly deactivated the bomb, but when they came to search the car further, another bomb wired to the handle of the trunk let go and took quite a few policemen with it.

I put the bomb in the trunk after having checked it for timing and radio devices; rescued Polly from the clutches of the Martins and drove home. Just before my house I saw a row of cars being searched by an army patrol.

"What's the matter?"

"Routine search and document check. Please get out of the car and give me your car papers and trunk keys."

The officer came up. He was a young lieutenant from one of the old Beirut families and I knew him well.

"*Marhaba* Farid," I said. "Do you want to see all my bombs or just one sample?"

"*Marhaba* Artin," he laughed, waving the soldier away. "Knowing you I should think we are more likely to find a battleship in the trunk. Where have you been, *Les Caves*?"

"Where else? I just left. You should have been there. All the beautiful women in the Middle East seem to have been there. When do you get off duty? It might be worth your while to get there a little before the place closes down, when all the girls are excited and all the men are

drunk and want to sleep. Try it."

"Good idea, if I make it in time."

He slapped me on the shoulder. I got into the car and drove home without further heart swallowings.

When we got into the elevator Polly stood right up against me and looked into my eyes all the way up to the top floor of the building. We walked into the apartment and, without turning on the lights, onto the terrace with its dazzling view of Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea.

For a long time we looked without saying anything, and then we turned to each other and she was in my arms.

"Yes," she said.

We went inside.

V

THE NEXT MORNING I went to pick up Sally Henricks and take her to the bank, where we went down to the vaults and extracted the briefcase. It was a pigskin case I had given Ken on his birthday right after we had gone into business together—it seemed like a thousand years ago.

I dropped her off at the house, after swearing profusely that I would tell her immediately if I found anything that could possibly interest her. There was no fear of anything happening to

her, as her building was still honeycombed with my boys, although, of course, she did not know about that. My expense account was not much good to me when it came to buying drinks, but it sure came in handy in the crunch.

Back at the office, I was just about to settle down to opening the case when my secretary announced John Ware. I had been too hurried to tell her that I was busy and couldn't see anyone, so naturally she had told Ware, who was a fairly regular visitor, that I was in.

I tossed the briefcase into the bureau and told her to bring him in. He wanted some help on an article he was writing on East-West trade, with specific reference to strategic goods that were supposed to be finding their way behind the Iron Curtain. As one of the big importers of steel in a market that bought and sold much more than it could consume locally, I was in a position to hear about many of the deals in the trade, and the stories behind them.

I told him as much as I thought he should know and he left after an hour or so, after we had arranged to have a late dinner together. I locked the door after him.

By that time I was about ready to explode with impatience. These were the papers

of Ken Wood, put in safekeeping the evening before he was murdered, and it was probable that they would tell us what we needed to know.

It took me about two minutes to pick the lock. For some absurd sentimental reason I was reluctant to break it open.

There were some personal letters that I dropped after hurriedly scanning them. There was a set of documents—four passports, one with his name and three with other names, all with his picture, and the driver's license and international certificate of vaccination to go with each.

There was an envelope containing a rough map with geographical coordinates and two sheets of technical data that I couldn't understand. I put them aside.

There was a plain sealed manila envelope. I opened it.

Four pages of numbers grouped in six-figure groups. It was our personal code, Ken's and mine, a simple 'book code' with a few twists of our own, such as interspersing at intervals the numbers of the plays we had run in football games. Sure, it was a simple enough code, and it would not have given too much trouble to a specialist with a computer, or to a brain like Bill Friedman, who broke the Japanese Purple Code before Pearl

Harbor; but for ordinary purposes it was secure enough.

I took out my copy of the book, *The Guns of August*, by Barbara Tuchman, laid down red and black felt-point pens, which is what I always like to use on codes, and got cracking on the numbers.

Two hours later I put down the pens, stacked the sheets in order, got up, stretched, and did what I seldom do in the daytime when I'm on a hot job, I took a stiff belt from the office bar.

It was what we wanted all right. Neatly stacked on my desk was the biggest load of dynamite to hit the Middle East since the last war, and unless someone de-fused it it was going to go up in our faces. Ken had tried and had wound up dead in the bathtub with a monster dose of heroin in his blood. But he had passed the message to me and now it was in my hands.

Just over a year before, George Hendricks, a young mining engineer, had gone down to the Gulf state of Abu Habbal to work. He was the owner, with his sister, of a small mining company they had inherited, and he had gone down at the invitation of the ruling prince to prospect for metals.

Later, while he was in Beirut for a few days' rest, a revolution had broken out in Abu Habbal and the prince, his friend, had

been taken out of his palace and shot by his cousin, who became the ruler in his place, and who began to look over previous mining concessions with a very critical eye.

Hendricks had gone to Ken Wood, whom he knew only as a rather smart businessman, for advice. After a couple of discussions over three or four days, Ken had realized that there was more to the boy's uncertainty than met the eye, so he had taken a chance and bluntly admitted what his real job was. Whereupon Hendricks had heaved a sigh of relief and poured out the real story.

The place was loaded with silver. He had discovered enormous deposits of silver, of an excellent grade, enough to cover a high proportion of the needs of the free world, at a time when silver is getting scarcer and scarcer. He had told nobody but the old ruler, now dead, about it. Even his sister did not know.

With the old ruler, with whom all arrangements were on a personal basis, there would have been no problem. With the new boy there was. If the Russians heard about it they would home in on it in a flash. If the Chinese heard about it there would be a three-way fight, with anything likely to happen.

Already the agents of every major industrial country in the



world were sniffing around the area, and he was in fear for his life. He carried the sketch maps and their explanatory notes in his pockets, afraid to entrust them even to a bank. What should he do? He had thought of going down to see the new ruler and talk business with him.

But before he could make a decent offer he would have to get some capital with which to fund his company. He was too new, too untried, for anyone to lend him money in the quantities required without his showing them the cards he held, and if he did that he knew of no one he could trust not to bypass him and make a deal directly with the new ruler.

Ken told him to take the rest of his holiday in Switzerland, but to keep in touch while he got his

friends in Washington working on a solution. He was drafting a message to send the next day, but in the meantime he was writing me this unofficial personal memorandum and putting it aside just in case. Two lines at the end of the letter said that he was suspicious of something going on and he would leave these notes with George's sister for safekeeping.

Ken may not always have been suspicious enough, but sometimes when you least expected it he was a belt-and-suspenders man. That night he had been murdered, and a couple of days later Hendricks had lost his life on the way to the airport.

The other envelope I had found in the briefcase contained the sketch map and the notes. I put everything into a small wall safe behind a panel, whose existence only Jim McMillan and I knew about. I had installed it myself, one Sunday afternoon behind locked doors.

Then I picked up the phone and called a high official in the post office administration and told him that I needed to make a very important call to Istanbul. I did not explain why but made it quite clear that a steel sale of the most enormous size and profitability depended on it. I made it even clearer that should the call go through promptly and with ease, my gratitude for his efforts

would be unbounded and I would be sure to express it in a way he would find more than satisfactory.

I could feel his greed twitching its muscles all the way down the wire, and within ten minutes I had a clear line to Istanbul, an unheard of occurrence in Beirut, and one that was going to put a hell of a dent in my expense account for the bribe that made it possible.

"Hello Jim?"

"Hello. Yes. Who's speaking?"

"It's me, Art Barrett. How's it going in Istanbul?"

"Fine, fine, but I think I'll come back to Beirut next week. The girls are prettier. What can I do for you?"

"Listen, Jim. You know the deal I was working on—remember we discussed it? Well, I want to know can your bank help me on the financing and general-support end? I think we've reached a crucial point here and have to act decisively."

"How urgent is it?" he asked, catching my meaning immediately. "And have you reached a definite stage in the negotiations? Because I can't leave here for at least two or three days. I can't promise you anything if you could come over here and bring the documentation we might be able to arrange something. We can certainly

"There's a plane at night I can try to catch," I said. "See you in the Hilton tomorrow morning. 'Bye. And, oh yes, leave some girls for me. Don't grab 'em all."

We hung up. He'd understood what I'd said, and if anybody was on the line—which I didn't doubt—he would have had a hard time imagining it—was anything but the discussion of an ordinary deal between the vice-president of a bank and the director of a steel-importing company, with the usual corny ribbing thrown in.

My secretary called the airline and got me a reservation on the nine p.m. plane. I sent her out to get me a sandwich and packed my bag. When she came back I wolfed down the sandwich with an ice-cold beer from the office bar and sat down to collect my thoughts. Then I said good-bye to my secretary, told her I would be back in a day or two but could be found in the Istanbul Hilton if anyone thought the world would come to an end without my presence, and carried my bag down the stairs.

On the street I suddenly remembered that I was supposed to be having dinner with John Ware and I phoned from the porter's cubicle to tell him I couldn't make it.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll pop around and pick you up in four-five minutes. I've got some

copy to drop off at the airport anyway, so this way you won't have to worry about parking your car and finding it on its hubs when you come back."

"That would be very helpful. Thanks. I'll wait for you downstairs." We hung up before I remembered what kind of a driver he was.

He came around in his Volkswagen in about five minutes and we drove off. I stood it for almost half a mile and then gave up.

"John," I said, "do you mind if I drive? I have to be there in time for my flight, and at this rate we won't get to the airport before next year."

"All right," he said with a sigh. "Should've known. First, you're an American, always in a hurry. Second, you're an Armenian, always in a hurry. Third, you're a football bloody player. Drive on, Macduff, I'm insured!"

As soon as we got to the outskirts of the town I speeded up and was soon going as fast as the beetle would go. Pretty soon we were on the airport road and he took his pipe out and rummaged around in his pockets and in the folds of the newspaper he had on his lap.

"Damn," he said, "I've run out of tobacco. Could your turn off into Mendoza's house ahead of us? The big one there. You remember."

"I'm sorry, John," I said. "We simply don't have time. We'll get some at the airport."

"Oh, but we do have time," he said mildly. "Samuel says so."

"Who in hell is Samuel?" I asked in irritation. "I'm sorry, I just can't—"

"Samuel Bloody Colt .45, that's who. Now turn into that goddamn driveway like a good little boy—now—or you won't ever know how you learned to play a harp!"

VI

I LOOKED DOWN at his hand, resting on the newspaper. All GI .45 autos are the same size, but the hole in this one looked like the exit of a tunnel. We drove down a winding driveway to the back of the house and into a large garage with three cars in it and room for at least three more. The garage door shut itself after us.

"All right, laddybuck," Ware said when we had come to a stop. "Now I'm going to get out of this side and you're going to switch off and get out of your side. And don't do anything foolish. I know you're not armed because you're going on a commercial flight and you're not jackass enough to go on a commercial flight carrying a pistol. Too easy to blow your cover. You've done some pretty

stupid things recently, but nothing quite that stupid."

"John," I said with a smile, "cut the comedy. You know that if we got serious I could take you, armed or unarmed. I'm not just big, I'm fast. By the time you decided to pull the trigger it would be too late, so what's this all about?"

"Oh, quite, quite, but I'm afraid that wouldn't do you any good," he said, nodding to a point behind me. "You see, Manuel over there is rather twitchy, and those Kalashnikov rifles don't leave much of you when they hit you at this range. I'm told they're full automatic, whatever that means. By the way, this place is thoroughly and expensively soundproofed, as you can see by looking around you."

I looked behind me. About twelve feet away a stocky man was looking at me pensively, a Russian assault rifle cradled in his arms, his finger on the trigger, the barrel pointing straight at my stomach. I grimaced and got out of the car. The Volks body wasn't going to give me a hell of a lot of protection if he let fly.

We came around the car and stood in front of it.

"Okay. I'm out. Now will you for Christ's sake tell me what the hell this is all about?"

"Doesn't seem to be much harm in telling you, since you're

going to be the one who does the talking when Etienne comes around. He was rather disappointed that we had to put Wood out of the way before he had a chance to ask him some questions, and he's going to be more patient with you. I'm afraid he's rather looking forward to it. You'll answer them, of course. When the time comes, you'll answer them. They all do."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"All right, son. For a start, there's the young lady I introduced you to. Now why do you think I did that? You want to know? I'll tell you. Her brother was on to something big in Abu Habbal. What it is only he, and the old ruler and poor Mr. Wood knew—until you came along.

"By the way, nice chap, Ken Wood. Nothing personal against him, you know, just business. Accidents happen in the best of families and so forth. Pity. Anyway. The boys went through his flat with a fine-tooth comb while he was out on a picnic. Nothing. He went out as soon as he came back and the idiot I had put on his tail lost him. When he came back I stuck a gun barrel in his ear and we tried to make him talk.

"Just then a woman came up to the door and started to use a

key on it, and while Etienne and I were watching the door in the next room one of the lads panicked, tapped Wood on the head and shot him full of horse. Some donkey who'd lost him earlier. New boy. Got rid of him later, or rather Etienne did. Then it turned out the drunken bitch at the door was looking for someone else and she went away. So we stripped him and put him into the tub for his last bath. One down, one blank.

"Hendricks got cold feet when he saw a couple of our boys following him out to the airport and he tried to play racing driver in the evening traffic. He crashed into a lorry, as you know, and burst into flames. By the time they got to him he was toasted. None of our doing. Two down, two blanks. I sent over the boys to take a look at Miss Hendricks' place. They turned it upside down. Nothing.

"It took me how many months and Christ knows how much money to find out that she'd checked Wood's bag into a bank. Which bank I only found out this morning, by which time you had the damn thing and it was too late to turn the girl upside down and shake her. Which is why I visited you. Cool little bastard, isn't he? Sits there like J.P. Bloody Morgan and spouts statistics on the sales of vanadium steel and molybdenum

alloy, while all the while the big bomb is ticking away under his hand. Where was it, by the way, in your desk? Must have been. You didn't leave the office after I left and you were in an indecent hurry to call your boss in Istanbul."

"Oh. You know I called Istanbul?"

"Get lost, son. Do you think you're the only one people accept bribes from? What'll you give me for a list of all the people on your payroll?" He laughed. "Come to think of it, what'll you give me for a list of the Russian network in Beirut? We just got it this morning."

So that was it, of course, and I almost kicked myself for my stupidity. Ware was working for the Chinese. That is why we had been drawing blanks trying to trace Etienne Delahaye. Our hounds were chasing the wrong hares.

"Who is this guy Delahaye, anyway?" I asked.

"Why do you ask me? You saw him and you'll be seeing him again. He's a killer. He enjoys killing. He doesn't smoke. He doesn't drink. He's the strongest bastard I've ever seen. He uses a knife like a Mexican. He uses a pistol like one of your Wild Bill Hickok types. I've only seen one man who handled a submachine gun better, and he drowned during the War. Sheer bloody

poetry. Dear old Etienne. They tried to kill him twice in Hong Kong. Twice in Singapore. He's still around. He had other names in those days, of course."

Ware hesitated for a minute, and stopped smiling. "By the way," he said, "I hope you don't mind if I leave you when he starts to ask you questions. The enthusiasm with which he asks them is a little strong for my stomach."

One of the doors behind me opened and Mendoza walked in, cradling a Beretta submachine gun in his arm. He had his all-purpose smile on his face.

"Ah, Señor Barrett," he said. "What a great pleasure to see you. I had not expected to see you again so soon. How shall we keep you amused until Monsieur Delahaye comes?"

"Meaning that after your gorilla comes I'm the one who will provide the amusement," I said. "Is that the general idea?"

The stocky man with the Kalashnikov walked up and slapped me, hard. "Shut your dirty mouth, you," he said.

"Careful how you talk about Etienne in front of Manuel, old man," Ware said. "He's Etienne's personal servant and has a loyalty you wouldn't believe. Besides, the entertainment will only be for them," he added, waving his gun in the direction of the others. "I won't be here."

For just a second I got a glimpse of the left side of his pistol. The safety was on. I put my brains into first gear and stepped on the loud pedal. When the time came for action I couldn't pause to think. The nearest person to me was Ware and he didn't know enough about guns to take the safety off, which meant he wouldn't react instinctively if something happened suddenly. Manuel had a stupid temper. That was a good starting point. I heard myself speak through a haze.

"And what else does he do, besides knocking out lame boys and installing bombs that don't work?"

The man they'd called Manuel slapped at my head again. He had a hand like an anvil, and if I hadn't turned my head in anticipation he would have caught me on the ear and it would have been curtains for me. I unstrapped my watch and lazily scratched my wrist.

"Señor Barrett," Mendoza said, his all-purpose smile still firmly in place, "if you would like to be taken apart even before M. Delahaye comes, Manuel will be only too delighted to do it. But do not think that he will be provoked into killing you."

"The only way he could possibly kill me would be with his smell," I said. "If he worked

for me, the first thing I would make him do is take a bath. But I suppose being a pimp working for a pimp he thinks he doesn't need one."

With an oath Manuel stepped back, took hold of the rifle barrel with both hands and lifted it to shoulder level like a baseball bat.

For that one second he was vulnerable. I kicked out as hard as I could at his groin, and he grunted, dropped his gun and keeled over. Without pausing or looking back I lashed out at Ware with my knuckle extended and caught him on the temple. He went down like a stone and I scooped up his .45 before it hit the ground. I sailed my watch across the room at Mendoza and yelled "Look out!"

He flinched and ducked his head, just long enough for me to get the safety off. My first shot ricocheted off his gun butt. The second caught him square in the chest and threw him across the room like a rag doll.

It is the oldest trick in the book, the oldest and yet the most reliable. People who could look into the barrel of a machine gun without blinking an eye, flinch and duck if you throw a book or inkwell at them and yell loudly. I had learned that from Jay Anderson, the gunsmith, and it had certainly worked on

Mendoza, who was lying crumpled on the ground.

I kicked the Kalashnikov away from Manuel's reach, as he was beginning to groan and straighten out. I checked the Colt for remaining rounds and found it loaded, and decided to stick with it rather than pick up the assault rifle or the chopper. John Ware staggered groggily to his feet and looked around him. It took him some time to focus on his surroundings.

"Well," he said finally, "I suppose it can't be helped. Etienne will have to take care of you personally. And this time I'll be delighted to watch him do it."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said.

There was a sound outside the open door.

"Look out, Etienne!" he shouted. "He's armed! He'll shoot!"

"Shouldn't think so; we're old friends," said Major Sanders softly, stepping through the door like a cat. He had an issue Browning Hi-Power in his huge hand and no expression whatsoever on his face.

"Who the hell are you?" John Ware asked. Sanders ignored him.

"I think you'd better get out of that doorway," I said. Monsieur Delahaye is supposed to be coming and I'd like to welcome him in a suitable manner."

"Don't think so, Mr. Barrett," he said. "Delahaye isn't going anywhere. He's just committed suicide."

"Committed suicide?" Ware repeated incredulously.

"With a little help from me," Sanders said dryly. "He decided to throw himself off the rocks past the Saint Simon."

"Do you want me to believe that a pipsqueak like you disarmed Etienne Delahaye and threw him off a cliff—no matter who helped you? Get lost. You're just whistling in the dark."

"I don't give a damn what you believe, Mr. Ware. I found your note in his pocket, telling him to come here. Call yourself an educated man? Your French is lousy."

"How the hell do you know my name?"

Sanders turned to me without answering. "What do you want me to do with this one, Mr. Barrett?" he asked.

Ware's face went chalk white. "Jesus, Art," he screamed, backing away. "Don't let him touch me. Listen, we're friends, aren't we? You're not going to let him kill me? Listen..."

Sanders waited patiently for his orders. The decision was mine to make, and I would have to make it soon, but it went against the grain. John Ware knew too much to live, but in a weird way

what he said was right; he had been a friend of mine.

Ware backed up slowly until he stumbled over the Kalashnikov. At that moment Manuel heaved himself up and reached into his pocket. Ware snatched up the gun and swung it around in desperation as I shot him dead with his own pistol, and Sanders brought the Browning down like an axe to crush the skull of Manuel.

VII

"SO, UNCLE," I said, "there you are. It's funny, all those guns I have scattered around Beirut, around the world. All of them built to my specifications. The one time I really need one I take it off a man and kill him with it."

Jim McMillan thought for a minute without saying anything. Finally, he got up, paced up and down my living room a couple of times, then sat down and poured himself another drink before speaking.

"So everything is shipshape and Bristol fashion. Ware and Delahaye down. Mendoza down. Incidentally, we found out who he is. As soon as I told headquarters what we knew about him they recognized him. He was running the whole show here. One of the big boys. Much older than he looked, by the

way. I've got it all in my briefcase somewhere. The other man down. Nothing, Delahaye's servant. Now the real work begins."

"Yeah," I said, carefully touching the side of my head where Manuel had hit me. Four days after it had happened my head still hurt. The bastard had a hand like a pool table. "Depends what you call real."

I had picked up Jim McMillan at the airport and we were sitting in my living room where I had just briefed him on the whole story.

"Have you talked to Miss Hendricks?"

"Yes. I discussed various aspects of the find with her. I'll give you that part of it in a minute."

"Does she make any connection between her brother's accident, the death of Ken Wood, and the terrible shooting on the airport road?"

"Does anybody? I've read the Arabic, English, French and Armenian local papers, as well as most of the foreign ones, including Ware's; heard the gossip in the same languages. I've seen the top-secret-for-your-eyes-only report of Lebanese Army Intelligence. Nothing. As far as I've been able to ascertain, the shooting on the airport road was a result of a quarrel over dope smuggling. Both Mendoza and

Ware were known addicts. A Kalashnikov assault rifle, an issue Colt .45, and an issue Beretta 9 mm. submachine gun were found at the scene.

"The theory is that Manuel killed Mendoza and Ware, who, with a reflex twitch of the trigger-finger on the Kalashnikov, blew the top off Manuel's head. Not much of it left, evidently. Oh yes. Another thing they don't connect is Delahaye's leap off the cliff. Jim, where in hell did you find this guy Sanders?"

He didn't answer for a minute, his eyes looking over the terrace to the sea. When he spoke, he was still looking away.

"I wanted to tell you, but you made me so angry with your nonsensical objections that I didn't. Do you remember the reasons I gave you for his Victoria Cross? Well, I was one of the Americans pinned down by enemy fire that night. We were goners. Finished. Dead. The rest of the boys might be prisoners of war, those who survived, but I was a colonel in the O.S.S., and if the Germans got their hands on me, dead is what I would have wished to be.

"So I asked Sanders, as a sort of macabre joke, if there was any way to silence the machine guns. He said, 'I think it can be arranged, Colonel McMillan. Then he took a couple of extra grenades from a fellow next to

him, checked his equipment, and went over the top. I think he knifed a couple of people to get near enough to throw grenades. I never asked him. Anyway, that's why I'm still alive today."

McMillan took out his watch and looked at it. "Eight o'clock," he said. "Can we see Miss Hendricks now? Probably she's out for the evening."

"She's having lunch with us here tomorrow and I've already told her some things that she should know."

"Good. That'll give us time to discuss what exactly—" He broke off abruptly and frowned.

"Did anyone know you were going to the airport with Ware?"

"I don't think so. I've got my fingers crossed, but I don't think so. I called from the porter's place downstairs at my office, Ware answered the phone himself, so unless they had his line tapped, there's no record of the conversation. There wasn't anybody on the street when he picked me up. It was dark. If anyone had been looking out the window all he could see was a Volkswagen, and I have one just like it as a second car. Same color. Different year but who can tell the difference? Met nobody on the way. If anyone makes the connection, he'll keep his nose clean."

"Or try to blackmail you?"

"Yeah," I said. "My nose is

leading with panic. Oh, by the way, Ware had this on him." I gave him the list of Russian gents. "Nothing new."

"All right. Let's go back to Miss Hendricks. How much does she know?"

"When she gave me the briefcase, I had to tell her who I was. Either that or not get to read the papers by myself. I figured I had—"

He waved away my explanation impatiently. "The fact that he held on to the briefcase for all those months without telling anybody shows that she has the necessary discretion. You had to tell her and you did. Now get on with it."

"Anyway," I resumed, "I laid it on the line with her. I told her what the stakes were, what had worried her brother and Ken, and what had happened to them. I explained why we're prepared to help her and how. She's not only discreet, she's bright. She says that when it comes out that she owns all the shares of a company that everyone seems to want, her life won't be worth a plugged fifty-cent piece—"

"Plugged nickel," he said, automatically.

"Inflation. She said we would have to form a public company before negotiating, because a public company would have a momentum of its own, and couldn't be stopped by accidents

in bathtubs. I told her you were a respectable Boston banker, and Ken's uncle, and had the experience and the trustworthiness to advise her, and the backing of a strong enough institution to be able to float the kind of company she wanted. "How's that for a spiel?"

"Did you tell her about me?"

"I told her you were a banker and Ken's uncle. Anything after that is guesswork, but then, she's a pretty shrewd girl."

"All right. Let's settle the details. We can find her a manager, as well as doing the routine underwriting and placing." He paused for a minute in thought, then laughed bitterly.

"My bank would love to do it. I would love to pick up the shares myself. But if we do, they'll say that the CIA engineered a revolution to depose the old ruler and bring in the new one just to give the silver concession to a bank owned by a senior CIA officer. You can't win in this trade. If you stop them you're murderers and if you don't you're incompetents. If you can't stop something happening you're a waste of the taxpayer's money and if you do you've interfered unwarrantably with the internal affairs of another country. The hell with it. Where were we?"

He got back on the track, and after a half hour or so the course

of our conversation with her was sufficiently clear for us to think of something else. He took out his watch, looked at it, and got up to go.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I think I'll go down to the St. Georges, check in and go down to the bar to see if I can find some action. Pity John Ware isn't there to help."

"You know something," I said hesitantly, "I'm going to miss him. He was very helpful, very amusing, knew everyone in town. I had to kill him, but somehow it's a great pity. How in hell did they ever get him?"

"When he was covering the Korean War. They made their connection there and gradually wore him down. As you say, a great pity. Where's my briefcase?"

I ran him down to the hotel, drove back, showered, changed and went out again.

The next morning I was awakened from a deep sleep by the telephone ringing in my ear.

"Barrett speaking," I mumbled.

"Art? This is Jim McMillan. Did I wake you up?"

The alarm clock's phosphorescent face said one-thirty.

"Wake me up? Goodness gracious. Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"Good," he laughed. "I'd hate to interrupt your hard-earned sleep. I just wanted to tell you I've talked to my principals about financing your steel plant, and they want me there as soon as possible to straighten out the details with them. I'm leaving in the morning, so I won't be able to have lunch with you, but I'd like to see you at eight at my hotel if that's possible."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Can do. I'll be there. Good news?"

"Yes. Good night."

I hung up. Polly rubbed up against me like a cat in the darkness. "What was that?" she murmured.

"Nothing. Just a friend being funny. Go back to sleep."

"I don't know," she purred. "As long as you're up—"

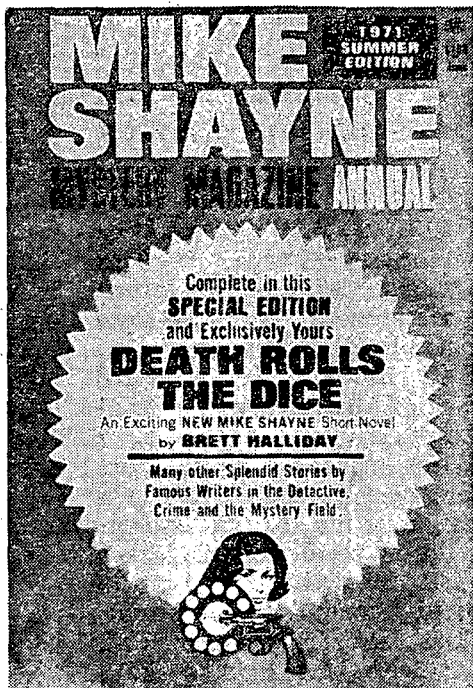


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IS THERE A WIFE AFTER DEATH

by CHARLES E. FRITCH

*Murder and lust had made their alliance. Now
all that remained was the dying...*

HE SHUFFLED through busy morning streets, his legs heavy with weariness. His brown hair was mussed, his clothes were disheveled. With a tired hand, he rubbed the stubble of beard darkening his normally clean-shaven face.

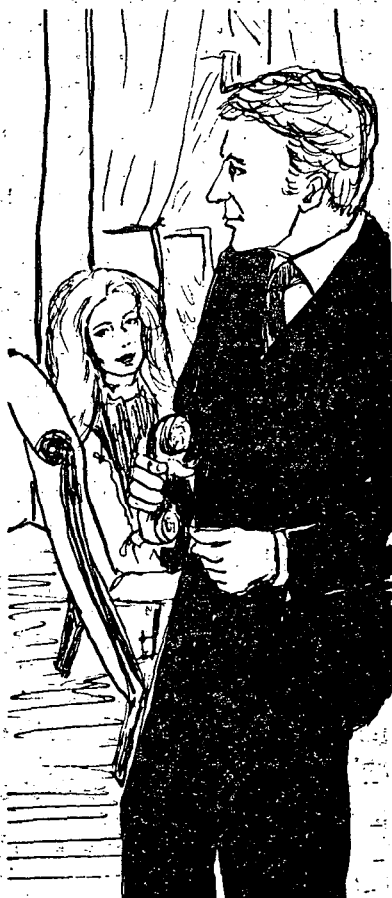
When a phone booth loomed before him, he paused to fish a dime from his trouser pocket. The loaded revolver in his jacket seemed unbearably heavy as he dragged himself into the booth. He knew he had to make the call, but the knowledge didn't make it any easier.

His fingers trembled as he dropped the coin in the slot and then dialed. When the last digit had clattered into place, he leaned against the inside of the phone booth and waited.

At the other end the phone rang. Outside, morning traffic raced noisily.

Click. "Hello." A woman's voice, low and soft.

He hesitated. "Is this Suicides Anonymous?"



"Yes it is. Can I be of any assistance?"

The man breathed a sigh of relief.

"I wasn't sure such an organization existed. I'd heard of Alcoholics Anonymous, of course, and Gamblers Anonymous. I recalled an item I read in the paper a few months ago. I checked with the information operator, and she gave me this number."

He was talking too much. He knew that, but he couldn't help it. Anyway, it would show her how nervous he was.

"We've been in operation here only four months," the girl told him. "Several European countries have had Suicides Anonymous for many years."

"I have a gun with me," the man said. "I was going to kill myself."

"Oh, don't do that!" she said quickly. "Suicide is seldom the solution to a problem. Believe me, I know. Once I felt just as you do."

The man's voice rose hopefully. "You know how it is then. You can't imagine how wonderful it is to hear a sympathetic voice for a change."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Not over the phone. Could I see you?"

"Of course. I'll give you the address of the office."

"No. Could we meet someplace?"

He laughed and added quickly, "Don't worry. I'm not a lunatic or anything—"

"I'm sure you're not. But I'm not supposed to."

"Not even if it's a matter of life and death?"

"All calls we get here are matters of life and death," she said. "But there are rules—"

"All right," he said in a flat, defeated tone. "Forget it. Pretend I never called."

"Wait!" She hesitated, trying to make up her mind. "Where are you now?"

He looked outside the telephone booth, squinting at street signs.

When he told her his location, she said, "There's a nice little coffee shop just around the corner. I'll meet you there in a half hour."

"You will come?"

"I'm not supposed to, but you sound so desperate. I'll be there. Wait for me."

"I will," he promised.

He hung up. He felt better now that he'd made the dreaded call. The air in the phone booth suddenly seemed stale to him. He went outside and as he walked he dragged in lungfuls of cool morning air. In the men's room of the coffee shop, he splashed cold water on his face, combed his hair, straightened his tie.

In the dining area he found an isolated booth in back and ordered a coffee. He tried not to think of what had happened the previous night. He centered his thought about the girl from Suicides Anonymous.

He knew she wasn't supposed to go out on calls like this. Much too dangerous. But he gambled on her being the kind of woman who fed stray cats, picked up homeless dogs to take home with her. She couldn't bear to think of him killing himself because she didn't go to see him.

He glanced at his watch. Traffic was heavy this time of day, he reminded himself; it took time to travel through it.

He wondered what his wife Glenda was doing now.

No. Don't think of it. Put her out of your mind.

Anxiously, he looked up as a woman entered and glanced around as though looking for someone. She was a pleasant-appearing brunette in her early thirties, with a slim figure.

When she looked in his direction, he waved to her. She smiled, made her way to his booth, and slid onto the seat opposite him.

"You're the one who called?" she said.

He recognized the soft, gentle, understanding voice.

"Yes," he told her.

When the waitress appeared, brown eyes.

the girl ordered a coffee. Her brown hair was casually arranged, and she wore little makeup. Her coffee arrived, and she sipped it black—the way he liked it, too.

He said, "Would you like me to tell you about it?"

"It depends entirely upon you. Sometimes it's enough just to be with someone else."

"I'd like to tell you about it," he decided.

"All right."

He paused, gathering his thoughts.

"My wife Glenda is thirty years old, blonde, and very pretty. I'm thirty-nine." He laughed self-consciously. "No. I'm really forty-four."

He waited an instant for her to say he didn't look it, and was peeved that she didn't.

"We've been married five years," he went on. "At first, we got along fine, mainly because I gave in to a lot of her whims—a trip to Europe, a fur coat, lots of parties. She wanted our marriage to be a lifelong three-ring circus, but I'm just not the type. Maybe I never should have married her, but I was in love. I couldn't resist."

He paused and smiled at the girl across from him who was listening intently. "I don't even know your name."

She regarded him with warm

"Mary," she said.

"Mary." He tasted the word on his tongue. "My name is Arthur."

The waitress returned to refill their cups. He waited until she'd gone before he went on. "Anyway, Glenda started going out alone. At least, she said she was alone. I followed her one night and discovered her with another man. He was embarrassed and obviously guilty, but Glenda was quite calm about the whole thing. She claimed he was an old school chum she'd accidentally run into and they were merely talking over old times."

"She might have been telling the truth," the woman suggested quietly.

"She might have been," Arthur admitted, "except I finally forced the truth from her. Suspicion was bad enough, but actually knowing she was having that kind of an affair made me miserable."

She squeezed his hand gently. "You poor dear. How you must have suffered."

He nodded ruefully. "It got worse. Now that it was out in the open, she didn't bother hiding anything from me. Last night she had the nerve to telephone me from her new boy friend's apartment and tell me she wasn't coming home."

The woman across from him

said, "Have you considered divorce?"

"Of course. She refuses to give me a divorce voluntarily; she says she likes the arrangement just as it is. And she's too smart to get caught with another man. Last night over the phone I threatened to kill myself." He laughed bitterly. "She told me not to worry, that my insurance would take good care of her."

"I couldn't get her to say anything more to me. I took out the revolver I keep at home and stormed out of the house. I couldn't take what was happening. I felt very sorry for myself. I seriously thought that maybe the best thing for everyone would be for me to commit suicide."

"Don't talk that way." Mary's face was so intent, so honestly sincere, she looked genuinely pretty. "Don't let her have the satisfaction. She'll come to regret her actions one of these days."

"Do you really think so?" Arthur asked.

"I'm sure of it. After my own divorce, I wanted to die. But then I thought of how happy that would make Jeff. He'd bring his latest girl friend to the funeral just for laughs." She smiled grimly. "It worked out all right, though. He's paying plenty of alimony—and he hates it!"

Suddenly she became conscious of Arthur's hand gripping hers. She eased her fingers from

his grasp and glanced at the wall clock behind the counter.

"I have to go," she said. "I can't tell them where I've really been, you know. I made an excuse about a dental appointment." She rose. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Thanks to you."

"I didn't do anything except be here when you needed someone to talk to. You're not going to—to kill yourself, are you?"

"No," he assured her. "I'd like to see you again."

"You can call me anytime at the office."

"I meant socially."

"You're still married."

"But she's cheating on me!"

She shook her head. "I don't want to be the other woman, Arthur, not after what I've been through with Jeff. Besides, I get too emotional, too involved. You're confused now. Think over what you want to do, and call me."

"All right." He hesitated. "I hate to ask, but can you give me a lift to my car. I parked it last night and started walking."

"Of course. I'd be glad to."

The two of them walked from the coffee shop to her car. They drove in silence through the traffic.

"You certainly parked in an out of the way place," she said, after awhile.



"I wanted to be where nobody could stop me from killing myself," he explained. "Then I decided to take a long walk and think about it."

Industrial zones gave way to trees and open fields. Soon they were beyond the outskirts of the city.

She said, "Are you sure you left it in this area?"

It seemed to him that her voice was nervous. He looked around quickly to see if any cars were around. He said, "You'd better pull over."

She steered the car to the side of the road. "Frankly, Arthur, I think you're lost."

The laugh died in her throat as she turned to face him. With one hand he switched off the ignition. With the other he held the gun aimed at her chest.

"Taking your husband for alimony," he said, disgusted. "You women are all alike."

Before she could protest, he jerked the trigger angrily. The report was loud in the car, but above the roar came the smack of the bullet hitting her body, penetrating deeply, tearing her insides.

The force of the bullet slammed her into the door on the opposite side, where she lay still.

He didn't look at her. He got out of the car, being very careful about fingerprints, shoved the gun into his jacket, and ran up the deserted road to where his car was parked. He got in and returned swiftly to town, stopping only to make a phone call from a gasoline station.

A man answered. Arthur said, "Jeff? I did it. I killed your wife."

He could almost hear the man smile at the other end. "Any trouble?"

"None. She never suspected a thing. It worked just like you said it would."

"Are you alone now?" Jeff asked.

"Yes. I'm in a phone booth. You are going to kill Glenda, aren't you?"

"Of course," Jeff assured him. "That's what we agreed, wasn't it? You kill my wife, I kill yours, so we both have airtight alibis.

Do you still have the gun with you?"

"Yes. Should I get rid of it now?"

"No, keep it with you. When I see you later, we'll dispose of it. Now listen carefully, Arthur. It's important that you do exactly as I say. Go to that place on Main Street, where the bartender knows you, THE HARLEQUIN BAR. Stay there for at least two hours. Keep asking the bartender what time it is. Say your watch needs repairing."

"Will that be enough time for you to—to kill her?"

"Plenty of time."

"Jeff?" Arthur wet his lips. "Make it fast, will you? I wouldn't want her to suffer."

"She won't suffer a bit," Jeff promised.

"That's good, because—" But the line was dead, which was just as well, because Arthur knew he was going to say something stupid like, "I still love her."

As he drove to THE HARLEQUIN, he fought the urge to rush back and telephone Jeff that it was all off. Except it was too late to back down now. He'd already kept his part of the bargain and killed Jeff's wife. Besides, Glenda deserved to die for making him suffer so.

Satisfied with this rationalization, Arthur drove quickly to the bar to establish his alibi.

In Jeff's apartment, the pretty

blonde girl looked up amusedly from the couch. "Arthur?"

Jeff nodded. "He's just killed Mary."

"Good. That makes you a free man." She patted the couch beside her. "Come kiss me."

"First things first," he told her, picking up the phone again. He dialed a number, waited for its ring. He grinned at the blonde and said, "Arthur made me promise not to let you suffer."

"He always was a considerate husband," Glenda said with a laugh.

The phone clicked. Jeff said, "Is this the police? I'd like to report a murder. The killer just telephoned me. His wife came to warn me about it. Apparently, he's been secretly meeting my ex-wife, and they had a quarrel. You can pick him up in a place called THE HARLEQUIN BAR..."



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JANUARY, 1972

THE INCIPIENT CORPSE

*She was deadly but frail. I
was strong, afraid. So—there
is one thing I must do...*

by
**MIRIAM
ALLEN
deFORD**



THE WAY I look at it, I have a trade like anybody else. You might call it a profession. I work hard at it and I'm good at it. In thirty years I've had only two setbacks, and I dealt with them. I'm thrifty, and I save my money; I don't waste it on cards or women or booze, like most of

the men I know. I was born and brought up on a farm, and I ran away to the city when I was fifteen and never went back. I've set my heart on buying a little place, when I've got beyond this strenuous exercise, raising some vegetables, maybe keeping a cow and a pig or two and some

chickens, and just spending my last years in peace and quiet. People laugh at me and say nobody lives like that any more, but I could, and I hope I will.

My trade is burglary.

I suppose I must have entered and left at least a thousand houses in my time. As I said, I've been caught only twice; both times I served my sentence and got back to work. While I'm on parole I obey all the rules. The only thing I have to watch out for is never to cop a third conviction, which would make me a habitual criminal in this state. That's why for the most part I pick places I've cased, where I know the people are away. I've never carried any kind of weapon and I don't want any trouble.

The one I'll never forget came too near to trouble. It was only a few months ago. It was the house with—well, let me tell you.

This was a big house, on the edge of a suburb they call Curwood Oaks, just over the city line. I knew who lived in it—a middle-aged couple named Mastick and his old mother. Mrs. Mastick's in and out of the papers all the time, on committees and things, wearing some pretty fancy-looking stuff in her photos. He's retired from a big government job in Washington, but he still gets a good deal of publicity. They have servants, of

course, but they don't sleep in.

I'd had that house in mind for a long time, waiting for a good chance. It's the kind of place I keep an eye on. I read the society pages for news of trips to Europe and that kind of thing. They're not fabulously rich, but they've got plenty. What I look for is, first, money, and then good jewelry. I have a reliable fence who takes care of that for me. I don't burden myself down with cameras or TV sets or stereos, like a kid.

Well, I didn't read that the Masticks were going anywhere, but passing the place one Friday night, as I often did, just keeping an eye on it, I saw signs that they were taking the next week-end off, anyway. Like, they hadn't put out the dingus for Mrs. M. to sun bathe in the garden, nor the umbrellas for when they're going to have people in for a Sunday get-together out of doors.

I stopped and got out and walked up, and sure enough there was a note in one of the milk bottles on the front doorstep. I turned a pencil flashlight on it and it said, "No milk till Monday." That's a fool thing people often do; they ought to phone instead.

You see how I make preparations? I'm always careful. I leave nothing to chance. I drive a decent-looking Ford, and I have a two-room apartment in a

respectable neighborhood, where I've lived for eight years and always pay my rent on time. I buy my groceries near by and make my own meals, and everybody around is very friendly. I'm just a quiet old bachelor, probably retired on a pension, not pally but always polite. That's what stage people call my persona; I've built it up very carefully.

So I got ready for the Masticks for Saturday night. Getting in would be no trouble. If you can't jimmy a door you can always tape and cut a kitchen window. People like that never think of alarms or special police. The house was dark, as I knew it would be, and there are trees in front so nobody could see me from the street. But you can't be too cautious, so as usual I was wearing a black sweater and black trousers and had heavy socks over my shoes. Gloves too, of course; that's elementary. And since my hair's beginning to turn white I've taken to wearing a black cap; it's less conspicuous.

I got in easy and proceeded according to plan. I'd never been inside the house before, naturally, but nine times out of ten anything worth taking will be in the master bedroom, and in a two-story house like this that will probably be the second-floor front. So I went silently from the kitchen into the hall, aiming for

the stairs. What must have been the living-room was at my right.

I stopped cold.

The room was completely dark, but there were voices coming from it.

I plastered myself against the wall, out of sight but where I could see in, and listened, trying to figure it out. My eyes were getting adjusted, and I could see dimly into the room. There were three people in it, two men and a woman. None of them was Mr. or Mrs. Mastick, as far as I could make out, or old Mrs. Mastick, either.

If they were tough kids who'd had the same idea I had and got there first, what were they doing just sitting there and talking in the dark? Besides, they didn't look like kids. I listened hard.

The woman said: "I feel a cold breeze, don't you? That may be the first indication. It often is."

Sure she felt a breeze. I'd left the back door open for my getaway. Only I wouldn't have called it cold, seeing it was August.

One of the men said: "A few minutes ago I could have sworn I heard soft footsteps."

I froze, rigid. What were they—a stakeout?

Then the other man said: "According to the Masticks, it starts upstairs in the old lady's room, somebody rocking in a

chair when she isn't there. Then—wait till I recall my notes—they hear it descending the stairs and it comes in here.”

“Any materialization?” the woman asked.

“Not that they’ve witnessed. But they hear her—they think it’s a female—sigh and sometimes groan, and once in a while she whispers something.

“My idea would be, subject to your approval, that tonight we just wait here and see if there are any manifestations. The Masticks say it’s been going on for a year now, almost every night, but it embarrassed them—people in the public eye like that—to say anything about it, and it wasn’t till it was getting on Mrs. Mastick’s nerves that they finally came to the Society and asked us to investigate privately. So let’s not do anything drastic tonight; if anything happens, tomorrow night we can conduct a thorough search.”

I almost let out a gasp they’d have blamed on “her.” So that’s what it was! Grown people believing in ghosts! And the Masticks had moved out for the week-end and turned the place over to this society, whatever it was. Don’t people ever grow up?

Then I felt myself grinning. It was made to order for me. Okay. I thought, stay right where you are and I’ll investigate the upstairs for you. I’d be through

the job and out of there in ten minutes, and they wouldn’t be hearing any footsteps or sighs that came from *me*. I got to the stairs without having to pass the living-room door and climbed silently to the top. The door of the front room was closed. I opened it gently.

And nearly fainted.

By this time I could see pretty well in the dark. And right in front of me was a rocking-chair. And sitting in it was an old grey-haired woman, rocking.

Every ghost story I ever heard as a kid whirled through my mind. It was touch and go whether I wouldn’t turn and get out of there as fast as God would let me.

She stopped rocking when she saw me.

“Shut the door behind you,” she whispered. “Who are you and what do you want?”

And I realized she was alive. She must have been old Mrs. Mastick; and she hadn’t left when the others did.

I collected my wits and was about to say that I was one of the team investigating for the Society, but she shook her head before I could open my mouth.

“You’re not one of them,” she whispered. “I sneaked a look when they came. That’s why I moved in here from my own room; if they come upstairs I’ll hide in that big closet. I don’t

want them to know I'm here. Fiddlesticks!" I'm not going to be driven out of my own home because my son and his wife are a pair of blithering idiots.

They think I'm visiting a friend while they go on their silly trip, but I just drove around the block in my own car and as soon as they left I let myself in again. And here I intend to stay. I can get my own meals tomorrow, just the way I did today.

"So," she went on briskly, "what are you here for?"

I just gagged. I couldn't think of a thing to say.

She nodded brightly.

"I get it," she concluded. "You're a burglar!"

That's when I should have turned tail and beat it, but I just stood there as if I was paralyzed. I have a methodical mind; I can't stand having things come up suddenly. That's how I got caught twice. I looked around for a phone, but I couldn't see one; I was afraid next thing she'd either call downstairs for help or call the cops.

She didn't do either. She laughed. But even laughing, she kept it down so those goofs in the living-room couldn't have heard a sound in that thick-walled old house.

"Wonderful!" she said. "The perfect revenge! That imbecile daughter-in-law of mine deserves to be punished for this fool



stunt. Believing all that stupid nonsense! Footsteps and sighs and groans, indeed! I've told them both, over and over, it's just something in the pipes.

"They've been driving me mad for weeks now with all this balderdash, waking me up in the middle of the night to listen to nothing I could hear—and my hearing's as keen as it ever was; so's my sight. I've never seen or heard a thing that couldn't be natural to any house as old as this one is."

She jumped up out of the chair.

"Come on," she said. "I'll show you where she keeps her stuff, and I'll point out the good pieces. None of it's heirlooms from my family, just from hers, so I don't care. It's all insured, anyway.

"And let me see—" She stood,

owning as if she was puzzled. Sam ought to suffer a bit too, or falling for all this and letting her make a fool of him. He wasn't any jewelry worth taking. "don't suppose you'd care for a pair of fine binoculars?"

"No," I let out. It was the first sound I'd uttered.

"You'd rather have money, of course, but they didn't leave much in the house. Oh, I know!" He almost clapped her hands, like a kid, only she made sure they didn't strike and make a noise. "His silver dollars! He has 'em, don't know how many that he's saved from the old days. It's against the law, isn't it? So dangerous for a man in his position, but it won't make any difference to you. I know where he keeps them, too."

I always carry a respectable-looking briefcase. I never take anything too bulky for it.

Believe it or not, that malicious old witch actually did stand over her daughter-in-law's jewels. There was one very nice old-fashioned emerald and diamond necklace, and a beautiful ruby bracelet, and half a dozen other things with good stones that could easily be taken out and reset. Then she reached into a drawer and hauled out a wash-leather bag that from the feel of it held heaven knows how many old silver dollars. When I got to count them it was

seventy-two. My fence can take care of that kind of loot. He has plenty of connections. And he only charges a reasonable commission.

She even helped me pack everything in my briefcase.

"Well," she whispered cheerfully, "you've had quite a lucrative evening, haven't you? Can you get past those people downstairs all right?"

I nodded.

"By the way," she added, "when you came in past them, did you hear them say anything about their plans?"

I found my voice, after a fashion. I remembered to whisper too.

"They'll stay down there tonight," I said. "Tomorrow night they might go through the house."

"I'll remember that. I guess I'll go visit my friend after all. Wouldn't it be funny if they got blamed when they discover the burglary? Such fine, well known people!"

She giggled.

I knew they wouldn't be, but I let her have her little joke.

I felt awkward. What was I supposed to do, say thank you, or what? She'd gone back to the rocking chair, and was rocking contentedly while she gazed at me.

"Why do you wear your cap indoors?" she asked suddenly.

"Didn't your mother teach you better manners than that?"

By this time my eyes were so accustomed to the dark, so I could see her quirky smile. It was almost flirtatious.

And then something struck me like an electric shock. If I could see her so plain, she could see me. She'd mentioned that her sight was as good as ever, and she didn't wear glasses.

If she could play such a dirty trick on her own son and his wife, why would she ever spare me? If by bad luck I got caught, getting away, and was lined up for identification, she'd point me out without the slightest hesitation. Of course they'd never believe me for a minute if I told them she'd given me all the stuff, and if they'd apprehended me she'd want to keep in with her son and daughter-in-law, so she'd deny it.

And the one main concern of my life at present is not to have a third conviction. I'm nearly up to the sum I've set for retirement

and my happy life in my own little place in the country.

She'd certainly been a benefactress, and I hated to do it. But I had no choice.

I went up to her with my hand out, as if I was going to bid her good-bye.

Before she could move, I had both hands around her thin neck. My hands are pretty strong.

She died without a sound, got downstairs and out and home again in my car without any trouble at all.

There's been a great hullabaloo in the papers since those three from the society found the body the next night, but there's not been a clue and there won't be. I wonder how those psychic researchers, I think they call them, accounted for the fact that they never heard the kitchen window being opened or anything else?

Well, they ought to be grateful to me. According to their lights, I might have made another fine ghost for them.

Next Month:

Another JOHNNY HAWK Adventure


PIED PIPER CALLING

by EDWARD Y. BREESE

THE TRUCK SNATCHERS

*Men had redballed to death
down that dark road.
Now—now it was my turn. . .*

by M. G. OGAN



INDPENDENT Truckers' Association retains Cole Stoddard & Associates as a security agency. We investigate everything from petty theft to murder for member companies, but hijackings comprise the bulk of our work for I.T.A. Highway pirates hit small fleet owners more often than they plague the big operators.

When Bond Trucking of Kansas City lost two of their rigs near Prescott, Arizona, I was in Detroit to complete the investigation of a driver-swamper murder that had the hallmark of a gang killing, but wasn't.

My second in command, Jimmy Gault, had been out there for a week conducting a preliminary investigation and wanted me to call him as soon as

I reached our Chicago office. He was checked in at a Prescott motel.

"What have you got so far?" I asked as soon as Jimmy was on the line.

"Loose ends, Cole." Jimmy sounded frustrated. "The Bond trucks were carrying liquor, cigarettes, and pharmaceuticals. One was hijacked just east of Williams and the other one disappeared near Prescott."

"Where were the trucks found?" It's standard operational procedure for hijackers to transfer stolen cargo as soon as possible to their own rigs.

"That's just one of the loose ends," Jimmy said. "The trucks haven't been found. To make it more puzzling, three tractors and semis running to Los Angeles for large operators have disappeared in the same way."

"In that area?"

"Right. Look at the map and you'll see that Flagstaff, Williams, and Prescott with the roads between form a rough triangle."

"I don't have to look at the map."

"I've talked with all the drivers involved, either by telephone or personally. None are any help."

Both Bond trucks had been stolen from the parking lot of all-night diners; two of the others had gone the same route, but the

third one had been flagged down and taken at gunpoint.

"The four men were armed with automatic rifles," Jimmy reported, "with paper sacks over their heads, and wearing flak vests. Neither the F.B.I. nor the Arizona Rangers found a trace of how they made the scene. They just popped up out of the desert and took the rig."

"I'll join you out there Jimmy."

"You might stop in Kansas City on the way to cool off the Bond brothers," he said. "They've been lighting a fire under me out here."

"I'll have a chat with them."

Jerry Bond was senior partner. His brother was on the road pushing a rig to Dallas. Jerry had a hole-in-the-wall office behind an old garage marked BOND TRUCKING TERMINAL.

"Damn it, Stoddard, it's been a lousy week since our trucks were taken, and what has your man done about it?" Jerry Bond was a ruddy-faced customer too big for his desk chair. He punctuated his sentences by slapping the flat of his hand on the battered desk. "Not a damned thing! Why do we pay you guys?"

"To do what the F.B.I. and the Arizona Rangers haven't been able to do," I said, "and you're paying them, too. Maybe more than you're paying us."

"Hell!" Jerry brushed my statement aside with a wave of his big hand. "Forget the cargo. That's long-gone now. So are some good customers. Just get our rigs back." Bond wasn't slapping the desk so hard as he had been. "Me and my brother are reasonable guys, Stoddard. But we're down to our last three rigs."

"We'll find your trucks," I promised.

Jimmy Fault was a detective before I weaned him away from public service with more money. He's a stocky and graying man with a face you can't remember. Jimmy has "connections" in every major city.

Jimmy's pipelines dredge the sub-strata of the underworld. Hijacked cargoes have to be marketed. Money changes hands; orders are filled. Goods have to be moved from one warehouse to another. Extra dollars in the right itchy palms net information.

Information is the life-blood of investigation, but this time around we were bloodless.

"I can't turn anything, Cole." Jimmy sat on the side of his motel bed, hands clasped between his knees. "My connections are as dark as I am. Five trucks vanish in the past two weeks, and never mind their cargoes. The professional stealers, sellers, and buyers are as sore

about it as the operators. It's ruining their image."

"I've been thinking about the truck they took on the road," I said. "Flak vests and automatic rifles doesn't spell *Amateur*."

"They don't spell *Amateur*." Jimmy is a strict constructionist about my grammar.

"Just the same, a hijack that well organized smells like a professional hit to me."

"I don't know." Jimmy scowled. "There are a lot of talented amateurs around these days. Automatic rifles are getting to be as common as popcorn."

"What have you turned locally?" I asked.

"Nothing that's interesting as far as what we're working on is concerned. I've talked with gas pump jockeys, short order cooks, truck drivers, motel people, local police and sheriffs—you name 'em and we've chatted. It's a fat zero so far, unless you're interested in UFO sightings."

"I'm not."

"If the F.B.I. has anything they're not sharing, and the same goes for state cops, but it's my opinion they're up a tree, too. I rented a four-wheel junker and cruised back roads. Nothing. Did you know there's a ghost town near here named Tennyson?"

"It doesn't show on any map I've seen."

"It wouldn't," Jimmy Gault said. "The copper mine closed in

1923. Sandy Gulch or Last Chance I'd understand, but Tennyson? That's a hell of a name for an ex-mining town."

"I'm inclined to agree."

"Homestake Mining Company of Denver owns the place lock, stock and barrel," Jimmy said. "They have a crew of mining engineers in there now. If they should reopen the mine maybe they'll rename the town."

Jimmy Gault is competent if unimaginative, and if he didn't have anything after plowing familiar furrows for a week we were looking in the wrong direction. He knew it and I knew it.

"What did you think of the Bonds?" he asked.

"I only met Jerry."

"He's the one who has been bending my ear."

"I checked the company before I left Chicago. They're slow paying bills but otherwise legit so far as I could find out."

"Slow pay?" Hope glimmered in Jimmy's eyes. "If I were you I'd do an in-depth on the Bonds."

"It's being taken care of. Star Agency in Kansas City will have a report tomorrow. I have a hunch that they're clean, though."

"I was afraid of that," Jimmy said. "Let's have a drink while we sweat our brains."

Gault led me to a bar down

the street from the motel. Prescott is called "Cowboy Capital of the World". Except for modern brands on the shelves the Round-up Bar looked the same as it must have back in 1880—batwing doors, sawdust on the floor, cuspidors; even "September Morn" sheltered her naked innocence over the bar mirror.

Except for us "tourists" the other patrons were cowboy booted and hatted.

"I should have had my son Timmy out here with me last week," Jimmy said. Timmy is a precocious eleven. "The kid digs the western scene almost as much as he does UFO lore."

"Sooner or later you're going to spin me a tale about UFOs, aren't you?" I tasted my drink. "Go ahead, it might relax my mind."

"Sure you want to hear my yarn?"

"You spin a good one, friend."

Jimmy finished his drink and ordered another.

"While I was jolting around the desert near the town I told you about, Tennyson, I picked up an old desert rat named Pettigrew. Blue eyes over a bushy white beard with a cheery red nose poking out of the facial

"I've met a couple."

"The old boy claimed his mule had broken down so that's

why he was walking." Jimmy Peltrew chuckled. "Do you know how most of the UFO sighting reports go?"

"Their car stops and they wait. Small green men peer out of little yellow windows. Sometimes the sighter is taken for a pin."

"You've been reading over Jimmy's shoulder. Well, Peltrew had a switch. The UFO he sees is huge and shaped like a green banana. It makes a noise like flying bats only louder. Peltrew claims he's seen it come and go over Tennyson."

"You mentioned some Home-take mining engineers are in here."

"I checked with them. They had a good laugh. They say Peltrew is a loony. The cactus juice he carries in that extra canteen could make a guy see anything. He wanted me to share rattlesnake stew when I dropped him at his camp."

"How was it? I've often wondered."

"I settled for a stiff shot of the stuff in that other canteen."

The bartender kept the drinks coming. Jimmy has hollow legs but I'm not so blessed. Late in the evening I had to call a halt. We adjourned down the street to an all-night restaurant across from the motel for something to eat.

As the liquor fumes dissipated through Las Cruces, Socorro, or



what he'd told me about the hijackings percolated through my memory bank. Roadblocks had gone up after each one so we could assume that the loaded trucks couldn't have been run out of state.

The same was true of cargo transferred into switch trucks. Arizona back roads go from nowhere to nowhere else. Main highways bottleneck at Needles, Blythe, and Yuma going west; access into New Mexico is

Albuquerque. Professional hijackers steer clear of Arizona and New Mexico. Urban areas are their bailiwick.

Yet we had five trucks and what they were carrying hijacked in the past two weeks.

That many hot trucks would be almost impossible to fence, and unless it had been distributed their cargo would make quite a stockpile.

Jimmy Gault finished his pie and second cup of coffee. "Wheels are going around in your head, Cole."

"Can you show me where this town called Tennyson is on a map?"

"Where it was, sure. Smack in the middle of the Flagstaff, Williams, Prescott triangle. It gave me a start when I ran into it."

"You gave it a good once over?"

"I looked around." Jimmy frowned. "I know what you're thinking, but seven mining engineers are camped out there. I wired Homestake in Denver."

"And got a reply that satisfied you?"

"I'd have told you if it didn't. They know the men."

I should have been satisfied about Tennyson, but I wasn't. Jimmy caught my dissatisfaction.

"Maybe we'd better go in there tomorrow," he said.

"We'll wait until I've been in

touch with Star. The Bond might be enlarging their fleet the easy way. I want to be sure about that before we move."

"The trouble with our line of work," Jimmy mused, "is that we can't trust anybody. It makes a man think."

"Can you line up that four-wheel drive for us tomorrow?"

"I can but it's going to be a hot day. I hope we get lucky and have to switch our base of operations to Kansas City. I know some good places to eat there."

STAR OPERATIVES gave the Bond brothers a clean bill of health. Profits were making modest gains on their losses. If they'd lost two trucks, however, they would shortly be in red ink up to their knees.

Neither Bond had any kind of record. Both were family men and highly regarded by neighbors as well as business associates.

I told Jimmy Gault about the Bonds while we were having breakfast.

"So it's heigh-ho and off to Tennyson." Jimmy was philosophical about this turn of events. "I'll introduce you to my friend Pettigrew on the way."

"Which reminds me I want to make a phone call before we leave." I paid the breakfast check. "Get the liver-jolter and

we'll take off from the motel in half an hour."

My first long distance call got results that prompted a second call. Captain Stapleton of the Arizona Rangers was the third person-to-person I made that morning. We then decided to leave the F.B.I. paddling their own canoe.

Gault looked at his watch when I joined him. "That was a long half hour."

"We're making haste slowly," I said. "Will that thing get us there and back?"

The rented Jeep-type vehicle was skinned up and flaking paint in large patches. The engine didn't sound too bad. Water gurgled comfortably in two Jeep cans strapped aboard.

"If it doesn't," Jimmy said, "we'll borrow my friend Pettigrew's mule."

On the way out of town we stopped at the police station in Prescott. Captain Stapleton had been as good as his word. I signed for a pair of riot guns to give us additional firepower. I take risks when I have to but matching snub-nose .38s against automatic weapons is too much like trying to fill an inside straight playing poker with a crooked dealer.

"I see we're expecting trouble," Jimmy said.

"It will ease my mind on that score," I told him, "if you'll

describe those seven mining engineers."

Driving toward Flagstaff on Alternate 89 Jimmy Gault described the men.

"Did you get any names?" I asked when he'd finished.

"No. I wasn't taking census at the time."

Jimmy didn't press for what I knew that he didn't, which is one of the reasons we work together. Most of my hunch plays come to nothing. If this one was true to form Jimmy wouldn't know how big a fool I'd made of myself.

Jimmy was driving. We turned left on a side road a few miles toward Flagstaff from Jerome. Within a mile it had become a rutted desert track.

"You asked about names." Jimmy swerved to miss a deeper pothole than others. "Like I've said, they were a young bunch, but the oldest one had a nickname."

"Sarge?"

Jimmy darted a surprised side glance at me. "That was it. There could be trouble?"

I nodded toward the riot guns. "We're loaded with buck-shot and rifled slugs. One round sprays; the next one kills. Yes, there could be trouble, Jimmy."

"It's only a couple of more miles to Pettigrew's camp," he said.

I'd brought binoculars. They were hanging around my neck.

"Can we see Tennyson from there?"

"Yes. Just before we turn up the draw. He's camped at the head of the draw."

Distance judgment is difficult for city fellows in Arizona's high desert. The odometer had clicked off four and a half miles before we reached the mouth of the draw.

I studied Tennyson. With brick buildings it looked surprisingly modern for a ghost town. There was a high school with a football field, for one thing. The tents of the mining engineers were pitched on the fifty-yard line, but there was no sign of life around the tents.

Tennyson was at the bottom of a shallow, saucer-shaped valley.

"Is it five miles from here?" I asked.

"More like ten," Jimmy said. He pointed out the mine shaft openings in the hills on the other side of the town. "My friends are probably working in the shafts."

"Did you get a look down those shafts?"

"No. It was off-limits and too dangerous, they said."

It was steep and rough going up that draw. Jimmy Gault made it in first gear. The walls steepened on either side of us.

"There it is," Jimmy pointed ahead as we came around a bend. An empty lean-to faced us; a

brushwood fire was burning with a coffee pot on it. "Pettigrew has probably gone for water. There's a spring up that path to the left of the lean-to."

"Hold it here," I said when we were a scant one hundred yards from the empty camp.

Jimmy braked and we jerked to a stop. Bursts of automatic weapon fire kicked up a sheet of dust ahead of our vehicle. The burst that took out the windshield came from behind the lean-to, but I'd sprawled out my side of the car by that time; Jimmy was out his side.

I passed one of the riot guns under the car to him as three second bursts plunked the water cans and bounced from the vehicle.

On his back, Jimmy Gault fired up at the ambusher on his side. The man behind the lean-to straightened to get off a third burst.

My first round was buckshot. The M14 flew as he screamed and raised hands to his lacerated face. My second round, a rifled slug, drilled him through the forehead.

Now I flipped over on my back, caught a flash of olive green in the sage thicket above me, fired once, then again. The M14 clattered down first. The tall man in GI fatigues rolled after it. I scrambled for the M14 and got it.

It was a shock to realize the man was little more than a kid. He raised on his elbows and turned his face to stare at me; mouth gaping from shock.

"Who else?" I snapped.

Glazing eyes stared at me. "No one else." It was a hoarse whisper.

He buried his face in the dust to choke on blood and die.

Smelling blood and cordite I pushed up to my feet. I'd thrown aside the riot gun for the M14. Now I discovered the ambusher I'd killed must have been reloading. I had an empty weapon.

I dropped the M14 to reach for the riot gun. There was another one. From the path to the left of the lean-to he was crouched, and fired from the hip, but because I'd ducked after the riot gun it didn't cut me in half.

I flattened and knew I'd had it. He couldn't miss me twice.

Jimmy's instinct to stay flat saved my life. I was too deafened by gunfire to hear his .38 crack. The fourth ambusher was on his knees when I looked, M14 in the dust before him; hands clutching his belly.

As if from a distance I heard the second round Jimmy fired from his .38. The man fell back when the slug tore into his face, knees still doubled under him, arms outflung.

I was slow and cautious Jimmy had it immediately.

getting up. It didn't seem possible that I hadn't even been nicked, but this was true. The one round that should have killed me had smashed the binoculars.

Moving stiffly, riot guns ready, Jimmy and I moved on into the empty camp. Four metal coffee cups were neatly stacked beside the crackling fire. Jimmy kicked them over with his foot. "God damned lunatics!"

"They heard us coming."

"But why the ambush?"

I pointed up the path. "Let's go see."

We'd ridden in on a burial detail. Pettigrew was face down in his shallow grave, shot through the back of the head. The body was cold and stiff but they hadn't gotten around to fill the grave.

I let Jimmy Gault examine it. I was having trouble with my stomach and blood pressure.

"I'd guess he was killed last night," he said. "Do you know why?"

"I'll tell you about it, Jimmy. Pettigrew's UFO sighting tipped me off." We were back in the camp. "Let's get back where we can see Tennyson."

Going back down the draw I asked, "If Pettigrew really saw a green, banana-shaped object that sounded like bats flying, what would it be?"

"A Chinook helicopter, damn it! One of those big cargo jobs."

"All I had to do is phone a fellow I know in Air Force intelligence at the Pentagon," I said. "Sure enough, they'd lost one. It was pirated by seven deserters and last seen flying south. Mexican authorities have been on the look-out for it down there."

"My wire from Homestake was faked?"

"No, it was correct, as far as it went. Sarge sold them a bill of goods. He and his buddies passed themselves off as mining engineers and leased the Tennyson premises to make a survey for an independent mining syndicate. Which is non-existent, of course."

We now had a view of Tennyson. A Ranger helicopter was blowing up dust on the football field as it took off.

"That will be Captain Stapleton," I said. "We were supposed to meet him in Tennyson this morning, but he probably heard the gunfire."

We drove toward Tennyson until we found a spot where Captain Stapleton could land.

Cargoes from the hijacked trucks had already been lifted south. One of the mine shafts had been converted into a complete machine shop with a portable generator.

Three of the prime movers had been taken after the cargoes, but the Bond brothers were lucky; their rolling stock was still intact. Sarge and his remaining three buddies planned to move them out that night and shut down Operation Truck Snatch.

Jimmy Gault and I let Stapleton and his men form a reception committee. We'd had it for that day.

"I guess I can take credit for getting Pettigrew killed," Jimmy said when we were back at the motel. "Sarge and his boys sure took me in."

"Don't blame yourself," I told him. "They would have taken him out, anyway. Efficiency was the keynote of that operation."





MRS. BECKER'S YARN

by
ED
DUMONTE

She was nothing but a harmless old biddy, prating silly, nothings about crime and criminals. Or—was she really?

"I MUST CONFESS that mystery stories are a secret vice of mine," said Mrs. Becker, who couldn't conceivably have a secret of any sort. She was that kind of a dame.

She sat on a park bench in the sun in the plaza of the Midland bank, a woman in her middle sixties with fashionably blued hair, brightly dressed and brightly alert to the flow of humanity around her. The knitting bag at her feet, packed with an assortment of yarns, a portable radio, a deviled-ham sandwich and two paperback books,

testified that she was settled for the day.

"A rattling good detective yarn," she was telling Mrs. Dreyer, her friend of uncounted years, "stirs my admiration for the cunning schemes of the criminal mastermind and the clever deductions of the super-sleuth who tracks him down."

Mrs. Dreyer, silently wishing she had walked home instead of coming to this particular corner to catch a bus, sat with the newspaper in her lap folded open to the article that had started the monologue.

The headline read: DARING DAYLIGHT HOLDUP OF LOAN COMPANY NETS \$30,000.

A gentleman who shared the park bench with them, also reading a newspaper, squirmed nervously and tried to pretend he couldn't overhear.

"That story I just showed you in the paper is an example of what my mystery magazines would call a perfect crime. And I was an eyewitness to the whole thing!"

As intended, the dramatic statement caught Mrs. Dryer's attention. It also caught the interest of the man at the end of the bench. He glanced at the two women and quickly turned back to his paper.

"Well, I was almost an eyewitness."

The knitting needles in her gnarled fingers flashed and clicked in tempo with her story. At times, following some unforseeable design of her own, she snipped off the piece of yarn she was working with, tied on a piece of another color and continued knitting without dropping so much as a syllable.

"You know that when the weather is nice I like to visit the different parks here and there around town to do my knitting. Some may think it's a waste of time," Mrs. Becker sniffed with delicate disdain. "But I know

that if it weren't for the extra money the things I knit bring in, Oscar and I would have had to leave the city when we retired and live in some backwoods log cabin in a settlement for old people."

Snip, tie, knit.

"Well as it happens, there is a pleasant little park with a bench that gets the sun all afternoon right across the street from the loan company that was robbed. And I was there the whole week before the robbery took place.

"Now you wouldn't know what that means because you don't read mystery stories the way I do, but a crime like this has to be very carefully planned. The criminals have to know exactly where everything is and at what time policemen and patrol cars go by and things like that. To do this the head crook sends some of his henchmen around to the scene of the crime ahead of time to look things over. Casing the joint, it's called."

Mrs. Dreyer apparently needed this primer in criminal technique and was listening attentively. The man at the end of the bench, however, was growing restive, glancing at his watch and paging aimlessly through the paper.

"Do you see what I'm trying to say? I must have been sitting in the park at the time those men

were looking the place over. I know there were several cars that I saw drive by the loan company quite frequently and any number of suspicious looking characters skulking about.

"In fact, if the police should come up with any definite suspects I'm sure I'd be able to recognize anyone who had been in the neighborhood in the week before the robbery. I haven't told them that yet, but when I read in the paper that they have captured the bandits you can be sure that I'll be a witness."

The man sitting with them dropped his paper to the ground and hurried to a phone booth at the edge of the plaza. After a few moments of animated conversation he returned to the bench to retrieve his paper and sit fidgeting again.

"Or perhaps," Mrs. Becker was saying, "I should go to the police now with the information I have. All criminals, you know, have to have their pictures on file at the police department in mug books. Perhaps I would recognize some of the people I saw from the pictures.

"My information might help bring an end to some internationally organized crime ring. There might even be a reward."

Mrs. Dreyer, who did not read detective stories and was not familiar with the workings of the criminal mind or police pro-

cedures, did not know what to suggest. She did, however, know an answer to a prayer when she saw one and she saw it in the form of a bus approaching her stop. With hasty good-bys and promises to meet again soon, she went to stand at the corner.

"At least, that's the way it would work out in one of my mystery magazines," Mrs. Becker was saying, apparently to herself. Then she turned to face the man at the end of the bench. "In real life, of course, the police are only ordinary men doing a routine job and the criminals are just ignorant hoodlums and thugs."

The man took on a mildly apoplectic purple coloring. "I thought that old bat would never leave and you two biddies would never stop your yakking."

"Careful how you talk about us senior citizens, junior," Mrs. Becker said mildly, "or one of us is just apt to get up and stomp all over you."

The purple color turned a shade deeper. "I got something for you, old lady." The man put his right hand inside his coat. "Big Mike said to give you this."

He took a plain white envelope from an inside pocket and placed it on the bench between them.

"He said he ordered some knitting from you."

Mrs. Becker opened the

envelope and riffled through a sheaf of bank notes. She put the envelope in her knitting bag, between the deviled-ham sandwich and the half dozen mystery books.

"I was just finishing," she said, removing the last stitch from her knitting needles and tying off the end. She unrolled the square of knitted material and displayed it for the man.

"Big Mike knows the code, it's the same as last time. The brown line around the edge is the floor plan of the bank, showing the position of the tellers' cages

and the bank vault. The yellow squares are the television cameras, the red X's the guards' usual places. This is the street in front of the bank; the arrows on the clock faces indicate the time the patrol cars pass. And this gray oblong is an armored car that...."

Inwardly, Mrs. Becker sighed. At her age it would be so nice to be able to stay home with her pot of tea, her cat and her television set. If only Congress would quit talking about it and vote to increase her social security payments.

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